













*Prem Chand*

*Twenty four Stories*  
*by*  
*Premchand*

*Translated by*  
*Nandini Nopany*  
*&*  
*P Lal*



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N.N. & P.L.

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# *Introduction*

## 1. PREMCHAND THE MAN by *P. Lal*

“What is life’s tragedy,” says a characteristic passage from *Godan*, Premchand’s harrowing last novel, “what is the heart of life’s tragedy, but this—that life makes you do what you don’t want to do.” These words are an unconscious commentary on his own career. Very early in his life, he lost his mother; his father re-married, though, as a postal clerk drawing about Rs 15 a month, he could hardly make both ends meet; Premchand found his step-mother so difficult to get on with that he called her “chachi” or “auntie.” His father married him off to a jealous and over-simple village girl when he was still in his teens; after long endurance and a painful mental tussle, Premchand re-married a widow, Shrimati Shivrani Devi, though he continued to send, voluntarily, an allowance each month to his first wife. Immediately after marrying off his son, Munshi Ajayab Lal made an unkind cut by passing away. There was, at this time, not an anna in the house, Premchand still a schoolboy, and four mouths to feed. The boy’s great ambition was to somehow squeeze through his Master of Arts, and join the legal profession which, fifty years ago, was considered profitable even if not very respectable. Most advocates and lawyers joined hands with the ruling and exploiting classes; some of Premchand’s wisest and most cutting satire is reserved for the black-coats. A Second Division Matriculation was the most he could achieve; he tried for the Intermediate degree five times, and failed in all five, because his knowledge of Mathematics could not quite make the grade. He took an ill paid job as school teacher, continuing to dream of what he might have been as a lawyer. He started a press; it failed because he was too much of a gentleman to be a good businessman. He



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started two papers, a literary monthly called *Hans* (which ran, mostly to the left of the political road, after his death under the editorship of his son, Shri Sripat Ray), and a daily, *Jagran*; both operated at a loss of about Rs 200 each month. To keep them going, he ventured into the film world of Bombay. Ajanta Cinetone produced a story by him called *Mill Worker*, for which he did the script. It described the tension then widely prevalent between workers and capricious mill *seths*. The censors chopped it so badly that it hardly contained a theme or a message by the time they were through with it. The Bombay Government banned it; Punjab followed suit. Disgusted, Premchand returned to Varanasi, nursing his chronic dysentery. His health, consequent on absurdly long bouts of work each day despite remonstrations from his wife, was giving out. He sat up one night, badly sick, writing an address mourning Maxim Gorki's death, which he was to deliver next morning at a newspaper office. Climbing stairs to the office next morning, he collapsed; on the 8th of October 1936, aged 56, he was dead. He was at that time the most honoured literary figure in Hindi and Urdu, besides being President of a number of societies, including the left-wing Progressive Writers' Union.

"My life has been a level plain, a kind of park," he once wrote, "with very few ruts. It has missed jungles and hills and plateaux." This is a literary way of saying that he seldom knew where his next anna was going to come from. "Luxury doesn't go well with the pursuit of art," he says in one place. "If a writer is prosperous and grinning, suspect him. He's not likely to possess sweetness, sense, or heart. A clay lamp should give out a bright hard flame; glut it with oil, and the flame sickens and dies." Luxury, for Premchand, was a dream. At fifteen, the age he was married off, he used to go to school in tattered shirt and pant; shoes were out of the question. After classes gave over at three, he went to give tuition, returning home at about eight at night. Next morning, back to school at eight, and the grind began again. "God knows what kept me going," he writes in *My Life*.

Unable to enter College on account of his appalling Mathematics, he luckily got a job as an Assistant Teacher in a local school at eighteen rupees a month—a sum which many people today would consider insufficient for cigarettes. He gave it up to join the Education Department as a touring Inspector of Schools, a job whose irregular hours, food and climate played irreparable havoc with his

weak stomach. Nor could he hold on to this job for long; publication of his first volume of stories, *Sauz-E-Vatan*, in Urdu under the pseudonym of "Nawabray," made him suspect. "This book is packed with seditious material," he was told. "You're lucky to be under English rule. The Moghuls cut off both hands of a traitor." A little later he resigned, probably using the same words which Hari Bilas employs in his letter of resignation in the story *The Red Ribbon*. "Sir: I believe, sincerely, that political institutions are instruments of a noble purpose, and must therefore be built on a secure foundation of truth, charity, and justice. . . . I find the contents of the order contained in Circular No. . . to be contrary to the principles of justice as I view them. . . . I cannot therefore subscribe to the text of the circular; I cannot subscribe either to the power that sees fit to issue such an order, for I feel it is contrary to my duty to my country, which must always take priority in a conflict of conscience. I should be extremely obliged if you relieved me of my official responsibilities."

Resignation relieved his conscience, but in no way helped his family. He opened a charka shop; it failed. He started hack writing. "Bless India, this lovely land where living by the pen is impossible." He came across Munshi Dayanarayan Nigam, the kindly editor of *Zamana*, an influential literary magazine in Urdu, and through his stories in *Zamana* gradually acquired reputation in literary circles. "Literary life is so hard and fruitless," he concluded. "These aren't the times for a journalistic career." In 1932, Pandit Banarsidas Chaturvedi asked him how much money he had made by writing. "Please don't embarrass me," he replied. "My first books were sold out to publishers; the Hindi Pustak Agency gave me three thousand rupees for *Seva-Sadan*, *Premashram*, *Sapt-Saroj* and *Sangram*. A few others brought me a couple of hundred. Shri Dularelal paid Rs 1,200 for *Ranga-Bhumi*. *Kaya-Kalpa*, *A Story of Freedom*, *Prem-Tirth*, *Prem-Pratima* and *Pratigya* I published myself, and these have brought in about Rs 600 so far. I should say that I received about fifteen rupees a month from my writings; even this amount is a generous figure. Hack work and translation: not more than Rs 2,000."

In one story, *The Borrowed Watch*, there is a scene between Nayak and his wife which illuminates this period of financial hardship. Nayak's wife says: "So there's no money!" "There was no reply to that. I felt myself go limp and beaten. Not a word of love,

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of kindness. Only: No money! No money! I wanted to get up and leave; but I stayed." Many writers are dreamers by nature, and hard workers by circumstances; Premchand was exactly the opposite. Work came to him naturally, but alongside it he constructed an elaborate edifice of visions, of a free, unexploited system of society, of satisfaction for all its members—the vision of the clean, happy village of Lakhanpur, which he describes in one story, as contrasted with Hori's crumbling hutment in *Godan*. His magazine *Hans*, however, soon passed into the hands of a "bunch of *banias*." Faced by this calamity, Premchand desperately sought the assistance of the film world. He arrived in Bombay on 10 July 1934, lured by the Ajanta Cinetone Company on a salary of Rs 8,000 the first year, and about half that sum the second year. "I'm doing this only because there is no other means of keeping *Hans* and *Jagran* alive," he wrote to Shri Jainendra Kumar. (The "bunch of *banias*," or the Hindi Parishad, had handed back *Hans* to Premchand after getting into difficulty with the authorities for publishing allegedly inflammable stories.) He played the role of head of the *panchayat* in his first film *Mill Worker*. "I don't see one of my dreams coming true," he wrote to Shri Kumar. "All producers follow the same old groove. Lewd jokes, to them, are the essence of humour. Unreality, to them, is the stuff of life." He had probably in mind the incident in the beginning of the film when the workers' leader dashes inside the palatial mansion of the mill-owner and stops dead while the mill-owner's daughter violently flutters her eyelids, signifying the commencement of love at first sight. "I can't do solid work here. I'm frittering my talents."

Among his friends he was known as "Bambuk," a phrase which escapes translation, though a rough approximation would be "Gas Balloon." "The work and goal of man is to make life happy," he wrote. "You are less than human if you can't laugh or cry." And how this man could laugh! His friends say he laughed "non-stop, in rolling guffaws," forgetting all restraint and inspired by the least occasion. "When he laughed," according to Mirza Mohammed Hassan Askari, who met him at the residence of Maulana Zafrul Mulk, "he did not stint. . . . I found him always amiable, always smiling. In fact, I used to tease him for never showing anger. 'Don't you ever get angry? Not even at home?' And he would laugh at that too."

He was, however, capable of brief explosive shows of temper.

Shrimati Shivrani Devi, in her book of reminiscences *Premchand at Home*, recalls one such instance. She was not on cordial terms with his step-mother, a bossy, fussy woman, and would go to stay with her father for the best part of each year. One day Premchand refused to give her permission to leave. She flared up. There was a quarrel. He slapped her twice, and left the house, returning towards the evening.

"Why must you flare up?" he asked softly.

"I had no reason!" his wife replied with sarcasm.

"I've nothing in my defence," he said. "But you are angry. Not a word since then."

"What should I talk about? I'm in prison; a prisoner has nothing to say. You tried to teach me a lesson. I've learnt."

"No, no lesson," he said softly. "I didn't want to hurt you in the least. It's just that I need you too much to want to see you leave. I want you with me, near me. This is your home. Why don't you make it yours?"

"I know very well I'm not mistress in this house."

"If you go away, it'll all collapse," said Premchand.

"It won't," she replied. "I just don't like it here. Your *chachi* loves you well enough: she'll take care of you."

"What you call love, is not love, Shivrani," he said softly. "I think I know that better than you do." And tears suddenly sprang to his eyes.

Shrimati Shivrani Devi did not go that year to her father's.

"What you call love, is not love." The confession, poignant and true, has its roots in the very early years of Premchand's life. He deeply lacked love, a fact which drove him to nostalgic sadness, to work, and art. "The greater the calamity," he has written, "the tougher the fibre. It's tragedy that makes a man." It's tragedy also that makes him realize other men as men. When Premchand lost his mother while still a boy, he lost something which he sought, in various forms, the rest of his life. "There is a shooting thirst in children for love," he writes in his story *An Impulse*. "They need it more than milk and toys. . . . Mohan never had this love. The fact moaned around him like a wind in a dark cave. He was a creeper struggling for foothold, grasping at straws." It is instructive and moving to remember Amarkant, the hero of *Karma-Bhumi*, saying: "Affection is life's root in boyhood. Give life affection, the tree rises, and leaves and flowers sprout abundantly. Take it away and

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a small shoot pushes out and crumbles for lack of nourishment. My mother died in my youth; since then a major root has gone dry. My life is dry. If I find affection, I will turn to it. I know it. I will be pulled to it. Call me criminal. I will admit it: I am a criminal. But I know in my heart that I am not a criminal, only unfortunate. I lost my mother when young. That is my only crime."

Premchand, like Amarkant, turned to affection and its satellite virtues whenever he found them. This angle of criticism should give us fresh insight into his stories and novels; into the early *Sevasadan*, in which Suman, the good wife, struggles to find affection even while leading the life of a prostitute; into *Ranga-Bhumi*, which tries to discover means of reconciliation between exploited and exploiting in the stifling atmosphere of rampant industrialism; in *Nirmala*, in *Premashram*, and even in the bleak, and magnificently oppressive, last novel, *Godan*, in which the root of affection seems to have gone totally dry as Hori piles one debt after another on himself with no hope at all of repayment.

Premchand has clearly incorporated his personal life into his work. Few others—very few—have tried to live in their personal lives an ideal which they sustained in their work. When his wife told him he was straining himself looking after his press, he replied:

"What can I do, Raniji? My life is a routine. I cannot give up my morning constitutional. Then breakfast, a bit of reading for myself, a bit of tutoring for the children. A quick bath, then off to the press. Back from work, an hour with the kids—that's a must: you know it relaxes me just as much as it makes them happy—then, the press foreman arrives. Dinner at nine. . . . You know, one of my daily prayers has always been to have shorter nights and longer days—but you can't order nature around." This severe discipline and love of work is reflected in his direct, fluid, simple style, and in the ethical goal he set for himself as a writer. Be human, he seems to say. Whether Sethji or worker, zamindar or *kisan*, preserve your human balance. In one of his best-known stories, *Panchayat*, Jumman Sheikh puts his arms around Alagu Choudhuri's neck and embraces him. "Today I have discovered a great truth—I have seen that when you become one of the *panchayat*, you are no one's enemy. You are there only to dispense justice." (*The Panchayat is the Voice of God*, p. 57)

## 2. PREMCHAND THE WRITER by P. Lal

Professor Kedar Nath, writing on Premchand's "mind and art," credited him with rescuing "literature from the utter chaos of catchpenny romanticism, diffuseness and verbosity," and compared him to Tolstoy. Tolstoy has tended to come in whenever critical mention is made of Premchand; the comparison, while useful, has a facile flavour when explored closely. The breadth and variety of *War and Peace* are beyond Premchand; nor did Premchand run into the bosom of the temple, being, to his last gasp, an intelligent and sensitive agnostic. But these are minor points. The really great difference is one of literary method and artistic effect. In nearly everything he wrote, Tolstoy behaved with the admirable poise and detachment of the "nail-paring" artist, "refined out of existence." Premchand went into his work hammer-and-tongs; many characters in his stories and novels—Nayak in *The Borrowed Watch*, Amarkant in *Karma-Bhumi*, Kavasji in *The Curse*—are modelled on his own life, and are best appreciated when we have some knowledge of his personal traits and of specific events in his career. Premchand's work is a commentary on his life; a kind of fictionalized biography. It is possible, for instance, for Hansraj Rehbar to write a book which dovetails passages from Premchand's work with brief accounts of his real life, and present it as a "biography" without fear of being hauled up for grievous error.

Premchand, the man, is so closely interlinked with Premchand, the writer, that his overpowering moments of nostalgia, discontent, political fervour, and social idealism stand out in the novels and stories. Nostalgia, an offshoot of tenderness and heart, gives a purifying memorable atmosphere to much of his work. "The stories a man remembers," he says in his autobiographical notes, "are mostly the stories his mother or sister tells him. How eagerly I used to look forward to these stories, and how I wandered in a new world as they began to unfold. These linger. Of youth's sweet things, they are the sweetest. Toys, sweets, and fairs dissolve; but these linger." In *The Theft*, one of his famous stories, he breaks suddenly into a melancholy rhapsody: "Youth, youth, who forgets youth? The rickety hut, the patched-up bed, naked bodies, wet feet naked on soft fields, the mango trees one climbed. . . . They pass like a show of magic and bring sadness to the heart."

It is not quite correct to say that Premchand did away with

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"catchpenny romanticism." Romance lies suppressed in almost every line he wrote, and springs up, a bewildering disguised jack-in-the-box, at the most unexpected moments. He makes it clear in a statement on the craft of story-writing that "climax" and "psychological insight" are the heart of a story, but the heart cannot function without "a touch of humanity and poetic nuance. This nuance makes a story. Everything else fails."

Shri Jainendra Kumar once remarked to him that he found Bengali literature very moving.

"Have you ever noticed," replied Premchand, "that Bengali literature is preoccupied with sex? I don't have much sex in my own work, I'm afraid."

"Is that why Bengali literature touches the reader's heart?" asked Shri Kumar.

"I think so," replied Premchand. "By sex I mean, of course, frequent reference to and thought of women. This tends to create a certain amount of nostalgia and pleasant exciting sentiment. Nostalgia gives thought a brilliant softness; purpose and discipline give thought a certain amount of hardness. For greatness both are necessary. . . ."

His eyes had a "gaze of gentle illumination." "Bengalis are a reflective and sentimental people," he continued. "Reflection and sentimentality reach to heights which I can never dream of attaining. My logic and realism are limited. . . ."

Premchand combined a hard sense of economic and political realities with a poetic awareness of human character; in this lies his uniqueness. He put it himself in a different way; he is concerned, he says, with "a tension, a friction that overcomes the fact and the event. I want to survey feeling and desire in their purity; I always try to proceed to that condition. I think there is no other way of creating art."

Let us consider the "fact and the event" of his times, the facts and events with which he grew and which he described in varying shades in his creative work. There is, first, the historical background, the appalling impoverished status of the *kisan*. Taxes of all kinds, grasping middlemen, zamindars blind to reform, living smugly with small harems and riding in American limousines. "Food prices dropped alarmingly this year," runs a passage in *Karma-Bhumi*. "To the level that existed forty years ago. High prices brought in enough for the peasant to be able to pay his rent.

Now he is in a fix, and he knows no way out. Rent, debt; debt and rent; rent and debt. It's all over the country, all over the world. The same story. He gives ten seers of molasses where he gave four before—and there's no buyer. One and a half rupees a maund for wheat is too expensive. But you've got to sell, for the rent-collector is at the doorstep." Hori, in *Godan*, depicts the tragedy of the hopelessly indebted peasant.

Secondly, he had to come to artistic terms with the social inequality of his times. He felt that the law courts functioned little better than as stooges of an exploiting colonial régime; he chastised his friend Munshi Dayanarayan Nigam for inviting English officials to his daughter's wedding party. "They're laughing behind your back," he wrote. But what hurt him most was the incessant friction between the industrial worker and the mill owner. In one story he notes that "Sethji's chief aim in life was to make money, and his chief duty to preserve the means by which the money came." The means are, naturally, black. Arguing, begging, cajoling fails to convince Sethji that his workers need more pay. Eventually, their leader addresses them: "He will not budge an inch. He says, Work or don't work; I don't care. That mill, my mill, your mill, made a profit of ten lakhs this year. That doesn't satisfy him." This story, unlike *Godan*, ends in reconciliation, an example of the extent to which Gandhian philosophy influenced the later works of Premchand. *Premashram* ends in a similar compromise, which some critics insist on calling an artistic débâcle. The reconciliation is a débâcle only if we fail to notice that Premchand saw it in terms of "a touch of humanity, a poetic nuance."

This, sketchily, is the extent to which Premchand drew on the political, social and economic milieu for his inspiration and the depth to which he penetrated it in the process of transmuting it into the stuff of art. Some critics try to label him a "realist"; he is a realist, but there are kinds and kinds of realism. Premchand's realism is a backdrop against which he can build character. "I never write a story for the sake of describing incident and event," he explains. "I write for only one sake: to present a human truth, or to show a new angle of looking at common things. . . . Plots and incidents are available a dozen for an anna; but psychological insight is not found on every tree."

But he does not want psychological insight divorced from the stream of current event. "There have been innumerable attempts to



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define literature," he says. "I prefer the one that describes it as a criticism of life. Whether in the form of an essay or a poem or a short story, literature's chief function is to present an honest critical view of life." He found his times crammed with material that gave a writer chance to attempt an honest, critical view. "I cannot conceive of literature as a soporific," he said in his presidential address to the Progressive Writers' Union which met in Lucknow in 1936. "If it is no better than a soporific, it is no better than useless or dead. We must see to it that our literature possesses these fundamental qualities: dignified thought, the breath of freedom, beauty and clarity of style, and a clear reflection of life's calm and bustle, the heart of truth. It must give us a goal, it must make us alive, it must make us think."

His novels are attempts to fulfil his desire to provide a human goal through the medium of literature, to present what according to him was "the heart of truth." *Seva-Sadan*, written in 1907, *Premashram*, in 1922, and *Nirmala*, in 1923, are early novels and representative of the eagerness to reform social evils which then obsessed Premchand. In *Sevasadan* the heart of truth is the tragic predicament of an innocent wife forced into prostitution; in *Premashram*, drama seethes around the conflicting interests of tenant and landlord; *Nirmala* deplores the dowry system (in marrying Shrimati Shivrani Devi, a widow, Premchand made it an express condition that there was to be no dowry, though, as an eligible bachelor, he could easily have claimed it—and got it). The heart of truth in his later novels resides in economic and political motifs. *Ranga-Bhumi*, published in 1934, bitterly criticises the depredatory system of callous capitalism; *Karma-Bhumi* attacks the evils of British rule. *Godan* is a *Lear*-like, profoundly depressing picture of the peasant, pulled down by the weight of a vicious social and economic system into pitiful doom. A startling passage in *Karma-Bhumi* says: "If man made this world, let us break and re-make it; if God made it, there are no words for His injustice." But Premchand's ideal, in spite of fits of pessimism and irritability, never wavers. *Karma-Bhumi* is not really an attack on British rule any more than *Ranga-Bhumi* is an attack on free enterprise; the attack is not against the system, but against a corrupt set of values which parade as the system, against, in fact, a corrupt body of men who nourish and carry on what Premchand thinks are inhuman principles. "If, after freedom, we carry on as now," says Rupmani in the story *Sacrifice*, "why,

let's dump such freedom in the sea. We all know what we are fighting for. It certainly is freedom, but it's more than freedom. It's to reduce oppression, raise culture; clean homes, smiling children; enlightened universities, honest law courts. I don't give *that*—she snaps her fingers—"for freedom as such. I don't give that for freedom if freedom means putting Govind in place of John." Premchand's realism—as his critics call it—is not a means by which he portrays hard times or expresses propagandist diatribe; it is a passionate statement of ethical and humanitarian value. It is not surprising, therefore, that it takes so easily to Gandhian belief. His realism may accurately be described as an inverted idealism. Hence the nostalgia for the pure thrill and beauty of childhood, and the day-dream of the utopian village of Lakhanpur.

Down with a fatal gastric ulcer, his stomach bloated, "dark-circled eyes, peering from abysms, sunken dry cheeks, skinny fingers," Premchand continued the double role to his death-bed. A character in his late story *Two Sisters* says: "The rich are robbers, all, everyone of them. Make money and build a temple; delight and praise! Who cares how that money was made, where it came from, how filthily dirty it is?" Simultaneously, he could tell his wife: "A writer doesn't have value in any specific way. His value lies in his suffering, his passion, his ideals, his penance. These are eternal things, and they always have significance. The writer is great because he is, if a good writer, the least selfish of men; all his work is an attempt at unselfish communication." On the one hand, bitter and righteous disgust, on the other, faith in man; on the one hand, revolutionary ardour and reforming passion, on the other, the vision of a serene goal; a sense of duty and hard work set against "wanting to do just as I like," as he wrote to Munshi Nigam; personal example set by marrying Shivrani Devi opposed to his impotence to do anything significant to cure the larger social malady; an education official writing sedition against the government which employs him—Premchand's life and work is full of such apparent contradictions, and the critic must wait for time to sift them before he "places" Premchand. While they slowly fall into clearer focus, this much may be said with certainty: Premchand is a memorable writer because he has sincerity and style and purpose. But a writer with so much heart as Premchand had should always be suspect, for he may one day baffle the timid critics and announce himself as a "major" writer, instead of one merely readable and instructive.

### 3. THE STORIES IN THIS ANTHOLOGY

by Nandini Nopany and P. Lal

In 1910 Premchand switched from Urdu to Hindi with a story called *Baḍe Ghara kī Beṭī* with which we have decided to open this collection. The stories have been arranged chronologically, to give the interested reader a clear idea of the development of Premchand as a story writer conscientiously working on and improving his narrative craft over a period of twenty-six years, 1910-1936. With the exception of the last four stories (which have been taken from *Kafan*, the volume that appeared posthumously in 1936), all have been chosen from the eight volumes of Premchand's collected stories titled *Mānasarovar*, published by Sarasvati Press, Allahabad. The accent is on the later stories, because we felt that these represented Premchand in a more mature and therefore more readable and studyable light than the somewhat un-taut and repetitive earlier stories. Most of Premchand's political and social themes are covered: the freedom movement, the oppression of Harijans, the exploitation of the *kisan* by the moneyed classes, the subjugation of women, the tensions of the joint family. There is a fair sampling of his humour and satire, and one rare example of soaring idealistic fantasy. (The transliteration within parentheses follows the universally accepted system of romanisation of the Devanagari script.)

(1) *Rich Daughter-in-Law* (*Baḍe Ghara kī Beṭī*) is a simple, touching appreciation of the compassionate nature of a rich girl, Anandi, who gets married to Shrikanth Singh, whose family is financially much less affluent than Anandi's. Anandi sparks off tension between Shrikanth and his younger brother Lal Bihari when she reports Lal Bihari's rude remarks about her parents to her husband. A major family crisis threatens, and a break-up is imminent when the "rich daughter-in-law" suddenly resolves the problem by her genuine gentleness and forgiveness; she is, after all, a girl "from a good family."

Madan Gopal, in *Munshi Premchand: A Literary Biography*, gives high praise to this story. Noting that this is the first story "to have appeared under the new name 'Premchand'," he says that it "marks a sharp departure from his earlier stories" in "maturity of treatment, as also the language which he uses" which "is simpler and more direct." If the story were a little less repetitive and lachrymose, this assessment would not be as over-generous as it now is.

But, as Robert O. Swan puts it, this story began a “purposive literature” and “gave rise to the critical habit (started by Premchand himself) of classifying him as an idealistic realist.”

(2) *The Panchayat is the Voice of God* (*Pañcāyata*; changed to *Pañca-Paramēśvara* by the editor Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi when the story appeared in *Sarasvati*) is a Premchand classic, a fine, clean, inspiring and heart-warming tale that has made its way into numerous high school texts. Jumman Sheikh and Alagu Choudhuri are good friends whose friendship sours when Alagu, as head of the village council, finds Jumman guilty of misappropriation. Jumman waits for a chance to take revenge but, when it does come, he refuses to abuse his new status as council head and decides in favour of Alagu. The “Voice of God” acts as a force for moral reconciliation.

(3) *The Competitors* (*Lāga-Ḍāṭa*) is another story of friction, split, and reunion. This time the tension is between two “competitors” for the village’s favour—Jokhu Bhagat and Bechan Choudhuri, whose families have been feuding over generations. What gives the tale its special interest is the way Premchand works the ideas of the Indian freedom movement into it, because the Choudhuri is a nationalist favouring home-rule and independence, and Bhagat is unabashedly pro-British.

(4) *The Brainwave* (*Cakamā*), David Rubin explains, “is one of about a dozen stories by Premchand that deal with the boycott of British cloth as a part of the Congress drive for independence.” The cloth merchant is Seth Chandumal and his problem is simple: because he refused to sign a “Boycott British Cloth” pledge initiated by the local Congress leaders, his shop gets picketed and his sales hit rockbottom. How the wily Seth goes about rehabilitating his business and simultaneously regaining the goodwill of the Congress forms the clever plot—and it is quite a “brainwave” that he comes up with.

(5) *The Ruse* (*Kauśala*) is a story on the same lines as *The Brainwave*, only the stratagem employed is not for political-cum-commercial ends but for domestic-cum-sentimental. The idea may owe a nebulous debt to Guy de Maupassant’s *The Necklace*. Maya, the slightly scatterbrained wife of Pandit Balakram Shastri, develops an obsession to possess a gold necklace exactly like the one she sees on the neck of a neighbour. The way she goes about obtaining it without excessively alienating her husband’s affections provides the

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delicate humour in the story.

(6) *The Chess Players* (*Śataramja ke Khilāḍī*) is another Premchand classic, described by Robert O. Swan as “his best historical story” whose intention is “to ridicule the sham values of nawabs, two of whom in this story watch without a tremor of conscience as the English army overruns their land. Their only passion is for playing chess, and they watch with complete indifference while their king is marched off into captivity.”

*The Chess Players* was made into a memorable colour movie by Satyajit Ray in 1977; the movie started a controversy, an over-fussy critic alleging that Ray had made his Wajid Ali Shah into an “effete and effeminate” character. “No,” rebutted Ray in a magazine article, “*The Chess Players* is not about Wajid, nor is it aimed to build up a case for the Mutiny. . . . The crux of the theme is to be found at the end of the film, in Mir and Mirza’s continuing to play chess in the British way after they have cleared their conscience by admitting that they have been cowardly in their behaviour.”

(7) *Babaji’s Feast* (*Bābājī kā Bhoga*) “is a fine example,” according to David Rubin, “of the compression and absence of editorial comment which characterise Premchand’s last stories.” *Babaji’s Feast*, strictly speaking, is not one of his “last stories,” its date of composition being very likely in the mid-twenties. The masterful manner in which Premchand brings a touch of compassionate humanism at the end of the story deserves special notice. A sadhu comes to the hut of Ramdhan and his wife, who are in the grip of dire poverty, and expects to be properly fed. He is satisfied—and so, in a disturbing, very Indian, very Hindu way, are the penurious couple. Madan Gopal explains the story as highlighting “the faith of an ordinary peasant to whom sadhus are synonymous with religion.”

(8) *The Song of the Heart* (*Ātma-Saṁgīta*) has been described as an “atmosphere story.” It appears so atypical of Premchand that at first reading it may fail to impress the Premchand devotee. To a sensitive reader it presents no problem: scratch Premchand and find a romantic. *The Song of the Heart* is really a long prose poem and, for that reason, defies summary and analysis. It may even be said that only that person who is able to appreciate the nuances of *The Song of the Heart* will be able to comprehend the visionary passion that enriches Premchand’s often merely-on-the-surface realism. (See Appendix: “How I Write a Story” by Premchand, where he speaks of the psychological heart of a story reflected in its “humanity and

poetic nuance.”)

(9) *A Special Experience (Anubhava)* is a “political” story. The protagonist is the young wife of a political detenu who soon discovers that neither her father nor her father-in-law wish to be associated any more with her. Her father-in-law is upset because he has no one to look after him in his old age, and her father fears that the British will stop his increment and even perhaps sack him. The secret police tail the wife. She recovers her faith in the goodness of human nature when Gyan Babu, an elderly teacher in whose house she has taken refuge, resigns rather than give away her whereabouts to the police.

(10) *A Winter Night (Pūsa kī Rāta)* is a well-known story about a harrowing, freezing night spent by a villager named Halku in a ramshackle shelter in an open field because his last three rupees, saved for a coarse wool blanket, have to be given to a dunning moneylender. The style is spare, dry, and cruel, like the January night. Beautiful, warm touches are provided by Halku’s dog Jabru who keeps body-snuggling company with his master through the chilly night. Halku’s last-sentence happiness ends the story on an unexpected but characteristically Premchandian note of cautious optimism.

(11) *Jail (Jela)* gives a moving account of women Satyagrahis during the Indian Independence movement. It appeared first in *Hans* in February 1931. The story revolves basically around the relationship between two characters, Mridula and Kshama. Though innocent of any political misdemeanour, Mridula finds herself arrested and put inside a prison with a group of women detained for political offences. After eight days in custody she is acquitted, much to the chagrin of her fellow inmates who feel that she is letting down the national movement by selfishly manipulating her own release.

In prison she picks up an acquaintance with Kshama-devi, a widow, who has eight months left to serve of her political sentence. After leaving prison Mridula passes through a shattering experience which changes her whole attitude to life. Her apparently secure family existence—based on her husband and young son and her parents-in-law—suddenly disintegrates when national politics enters and upsets the complacent calm of the village.

Her husband is killed by police firing when he joins a procession of villagers protesting against repressive governmental measures to

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collect agricultural taxes. Her distraught mother-in-law, in a daze, pushes through the crowd to the site of the firing and is also shot down. More tragedy follows—her son Bhan is killed by a stray bullet while witnessing the mêlée from the balcony of her home.

The story reaches its climax during the cremation of the “martyrs” when Mridula experiences an extraordinary mystical revelation. She has a vision of her mother-in-law and her son; and she also “sees” her husband on the funeral pyre inspiring her with his “dazzling face” to “go and do your duty.” As a result, she decides to devote the rest of her life “to break the fetters of slavery,” and the same prison which earlier was abhorrent to her now becomes a place of welcome where she would gladly love to spend her life as a guest. She has been transformed from an ordinary self-interested domesticated woman into a “liberated” lady of great self-confidence, dedication, and dignity.

The basic idea of the story is impressive: Premchand is concerned with the psychological transformation of a simple girl into a mature woman. There are some shrewd insights into the emotional make-up and behaviour of Indian women. The change in Mridula does come a little too suddenly but it is entirely credible. The weakness lies not in thin character sketching but in the tendency to portray all three women—Kshama, Mridula, and the mother-in-law—as somewhat lachrymose. At the least opportunity they express themselves in excessive sentimental weeping and make palpitating demands on the reader’s sympathy. Mridula, specially, overdoes this when she relates the story of the police firing to Kshama; in our translation we have felt it necessary to reduce the quantity of her tearfulness by condensing some of the repetitiveness of her copious sorrow; the abbreviation, however, is tactful and infinitesimal.

(12) *A Holi Present (Holī kā Upahāra)* is a story with a trick middle and a bit of an expected surprise ending. Amarkant wants to buy a pretty but cheap present for his newly-married bride whom he has not yet seen, and decides impulsively to get her a sari of foreign synthetic yarn. Shops selling imported cloth are being picketed by Congress nationalist volunteers whose slogan is “Boycott British Goods.” One of the picketers is a young girl with whom Amarkant starts a casual conversation, not realising that she is his bride. . . . He is converted to the Indian nationalist cause and earns her respect by doing so.



(13) *A Tale of Two Oxen (Do Bailom kī Kathā)* is an exquisitely crafted fable-narrative about the “picaresque” adventures of two very determined and utterly lovable oxen. The original is a little padded and in his translation—the only one in this book done solely by him—P. Lal has adapted and compressed where he felt it was necessary. Summarising such a galloping good story can serve only to ruin its childlike sweetness. Hira and Moti are the two playful oxen with invincible personalities, “splendid creatures, tall, sturdy, as hardworking as locomotives.” Why they run away from their kindly master Jhuri, what happens to them when they do, and how they return, make up the tale’s charming structure. Madan Gopal calls it a “delightful story”; it is that, but it is also a very perceptive portrayal of village life and custom, and an alert reader will quickly pick up many subtle ironic and satirical comments on village superstitions and exploitation of peasants by vested interests. Recommended for all children between the ages of eight and eighty.

(14) *Splashes from a Motor-Car (Moṭara ke Chīṛā)* is a strikingly conceived and executed story; the incidents it describes could take place in any major city of India today. David Rubin writes, “Though Indian commentators have paid little attention to this story, it is interesting for a number of reasons: the title is not an abstraction (such are comparatively rare), the villain is allowed to talk for himself—unlike the other heavy-eating Pandits of the stories—and it pictures sudden, irrational violence erupting, in this case provoked by a hostility to the westernised rich.” The protagonist is a pandit on one of his religious rounds as a horoscope-making guru, and he finds his new dress messed up by an irresponsible car-driver who splashes mud all over him. The irate pandit collects a crowd, stops all cars as they come, and pelts their drivers with stones. A Sahib and his Memsahib are dragged out and humiliated—he is forced to do sit-ups while she counts—and only the timely arrival of the police averts further chaos and riot.

(15) *Miss Padma (Misa Padmā)* has been described by Robert O. Swan as “the slightly nauseating story of a Premchandian modern woman.” A better perspective is provided by Professor Swan’s later remark, in his book *Munshi Premchand of Lahmi Village*, that in *Miss Padma* Premchand “delineates his conception of the modern woman to throw into contrasting relief an ideal Hindu woman.” The story at its best is poignant, at its worst contrived. In tracing the tragedy of an educated Indian girl who mistakes licence for



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liberation, Premchand expresses a common middleclass attitude of denigration towards westernised women. But Premchand tries to humanise Miss Padma as best as he can, and the last words of the story—"her eyes brimmed with tears"—are an indication of the way he wants to influence his reader to look at Miss Padma's suffering.

(16) *The Fine (Juramānā)* is about an Inspector of Sanitation, Khairat Ali Khan, who is notorious for imposing fines on errant sweeper women. One of them is Alarakhi, and she expects a heavy fine to be imposed on her because she has spoken harshly about Ali Khan behind his back, not knowing he was within earshot. Strangely, he does not fine her, and Alarakhi's opinion of the Inspector changes favourably. David Rubin has an interesting interpretation which does not, however, seem to be borne out by the text: "The story hinges on a point that may be obscure—the fact that the Inspector is persecuting Alarakhi because she has rejected his advances. The Inspector's return to decency is a favourite theme of Premchand's and, in view of what we know of the character, not so surprising as it may at first appear." Professor Rubin's ingenious explanation notwithstanding, it is still quite surprising.

(17) *The Thakur's Well (Thākura kā Kuāṁ)* "portrays the iniquitous system," says Madan Gopal, "in which the Harijans were not allowed to draw water from the wells meant for the caste Hindus." It is a popular story, currently included (in the Gurdial Mallik translation) in the high school English curriculum of English-medium schools in Calcutta. David Rubin rightly points out that "Despite the Indian constitution's outlawing of the sort of caste privilege that provoked Premchand's indignation, the story is by no means without contemporary significance." Low-caste Jokhu, ill, is thirsty but there is only foul-smelling water in his hut. His wife Gangi determines to get water from the high-caste Thakur's well, but is so frightened by the Thakur's approach that she runs back home. Jokhu has to be content with the stinking water. "Whether Premchand meant it ironically is not certain," says Professor Rubin, "but the idea (of 'Thakur' meaning not just 'lord' but also the 'supreme deity') is reinforced by the irony of the protagonist's name, Gangi, with its inevitable suggestion of Ganga, the Ganges, whose water is the holiest in the world."

(18) *Cowards (K yara)*, in spite of its slightly maudlin moments, is a finely developed story, and the characters of Keshav and Prema

as the star- and society-crossed young lovers are perfectly credible. Keshav (one of the names of Krishna the Eternal Lover) is full of idealistic promises, and Prema (meaning "Beloved") believes him implicitly. But Keshav is a Brahmin, and his father refuses to let him marry a Vaishya girl. Keshav does not have the courage to go against his father, and Prema, unable to overcome the shock of betrayal, commits suicide. Both are cowards, victims of society who could have been, if they dared, its masters.

(19) *Points of View (Manovrtti)* is a neat, witty, little-known story in which Premchand satirises the blinkered attitudes of people to the same situation. It is the *Rashomon* idea presented in a light, gently malicious vein. A young, pretty girl is sleeping on a bench in a public park. Two young men see her. Basant thinks she is a "good" girl, Hashim thinks she must be a prostitute. Two old men, a lawyer and a doctor named Shyamnath, see her also. One is sexually attracted but doesn't want to say so. Finally come a mother and her over-westernised daughter, and the truth is revealed—the sleeping girl is the bride of Basant and the daughter-in-law of Dr Shyamnath. "I was a child-bride; I haven't gone to my husband's home yet."

(20) *The Secret (Jādū)* is a *tour de force*. Except for the last sentence, the entire story is in crisp, staccato, Hemingwayesque dialogue. There are only two characters—two sisters—and, as the dialogue develops, the reader realises that Meena has been having an affair with a young man who has promised to marry her sister Neela. The story's heart is its psychological percipience, and the spare, bony style hides a great deal of poignant nuance.

(21) *Tipsy on That, Drunk on This (Vaha bhī naśā, vo bhī naśā)* is Premchandian social satire at its pungent shrewdest. Sparing neither the Rai Saheb Pandit Ghasiteylal for his addiction to *bhang* nor the District Collector Mr Bull for his fondness for whiskey, Premchand makes a telling comment on the foibles of human beings who are unable to see beyond the narrow limits of their social and religious prejudices.

(22) *The Holi of Love (Prema kī Holī)*, from Premchand's posthumous collection *Kafan*, is a little-known story about a seventeen-year old girl Gangi who has been a widow for three years. On Holi, she is fascinated by a young man's voice. Both she and he lack the courage to let the acquaintance ripen into love. He disappears. A year later, again on the day of the Holi spring festival, she waits for

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him; he does not arrive. She notices a fire and mistakes it for the Holi bonfire. Later it is revealed that the fire is from the funeral pyre of the young man.

(23) *The Shroud (Kafana)* is an acknowledged classic, an understated little masterpiece of controlled, grim realism that sees life steadily and sees it bitterly. "To read *The Shroud*," writes K. Natwar Singh in his introduction to the story in *Stories From India* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1966), "is to explore some of the neglected corners of our mind and to be confronted with a dimension of life for which there are no answers this side of the grave. . . . The naked realism of *The Shroud* is terrifying, and yet there is an economy of words and absence of sentimentality that places Premchand among the greatest masters of the Indian short story." *The Shroud* attracts superlatives of praise from all quarters. According to David Rubin, while *The Shroud* may "clearly" be classed as a "village story," it "transcends the limitations of earlier village tales and attains to a decided universality of utterance."

There is hardly any plot. Madho's wife Budhiya dies in childbirth; his father and he are low-caste village ne'er-do-wells. Their problem is to get money to buy a shroud for her cremation. By the time they collect the money, they are tired and thirsty; they go to a toddy shop where they spend the entire sum on cheap liquor. They get drunk and delirious, having rationalised to themselves that providing pleasure for the feeling living is a better way of spending money than getting a shroud for the feelingless dead.

*The Shroud* was made into a striking Telegu film called *Oka Oorie Katha* by the Bengali director Mrinal Sen in 1978. Writing on *Premchand's World in Focus* in 1979, Mrinal Sen argued that *The Shroud* needed to be interpreted "dialectically," and to treat it just as "a story of dehumanisation," he added later, would be "grossly literal." *The Shroud's* hero was an "iconoclast," he argued in a reply to the controversy that followed, "having the herculean ability to blast the values that build a frigid society." To politicise Premchand is always a great temptation; and *The Shroud* is not the only story that invites such intensely radical and dialectical approaches. In 1980, the year of Premchand's birth centenary, for example, the C.P.I.(M).-dominated West Bengal Government organised a five-day celebration in Calcutta and invited the C.P.I.(M). General Secretary, E.M.S. Namboodiripad, to inaugurate a programme that included seminars, "discourses on Premchand's writings," and

screening of Satyajit Ray's film *The Chess Players* and Mrinal Sen's film *Oka Oori Katha*.

(24) *Kashmir Apples* (*Kaśmīrī Seba*) is very likely the last "story" that Premchand wrote. It "is in the nature of a filler," explains Madan Gopal, "and gives an insight into the ways Premchand did his shopping of fruits and vegetables." It is unlikely that the mature Premchand of the last stories would allow his domestic shopping to become the main theme of a story, and Madan Gopal has obviously for some reason decided to ignore the chief purpose of *Kashmir Apples*, which reveals Premchand in a delightful tongue-in-cheek mood. This short-short is a mischievous comment on the life-style of the westernised Indian middleclass, who cannot appreciate the value of anything, let alone apples, until it has the imprimatur of foreign approval. It also pokes gentle fun at the medical profession. Finally, it irritatedly exposes the grasping selfishness of the trading class—in the case, the Punjabi fruit-sellers—who have no scruples in shortchanging and in other ways exploiting their gullible customers. The story is not as innocent a documentation as it appears at first reading; perhaps its brevity is responsible for the deception. *Kashmir Apples*, however slight technically, is Premchand at his confident, witty and reformist best.

#### 4. THE STYLE OF TRANSLATION

by Nandini Nopany and P. Lal

Each translator sets principles by which he tries to abide, and there can be no such thing as an ideal translation. With that pious platitude as an opener, one can try to have a clear look at the range and variety, the peaks and pitfalls of Premchand translation.

The late Professor Gordon Roadarmel, in his introduction to his translation of Premchand's last novel *Godan*, set out the following guidelines for himself:

"It has seemed wise to let Premchand speak for himself as much as possible, leaving him as judge of what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it. [This is easier said than done, of course, because Premchand's English was far from satisfactory and how he would act as "judge" of an English version of his work can be at best only a very fanciful speculation.]

"This broad ideal has had to be modified, of course, since the translator has to rely in the end of (*sic*) his own intuition in trying to recreate for the English reader something of the experience of the Hindi reader. That attempt requires a consideration not only of the equivalents of sense but also of levels of vocabulary and imagery, of syntactic emphasis, of sound patterns, and of cross-cultural intelligibility. . . .

"There has been a deliberate attempt to use as few Hindi terms as possible. . . . Some readers may feel that too many terms have been translated, but their background will probably allow them to think of the corresponding term anyway, so that they can substitute 'panchayat', for example, when they read 'village council'. . . . Weights and measures have generally been given their approximate English equivalents, with *seers* changed to quarts, *bighas* to acres, *maunds* to bushels or pounds, and so on. Some of the terms of relationship which so commonly replace personal names in Hindi conversation have been retained, but they have been omitted in some places because they seemed particularly unnatural in English."

Roadarmel intended his translation of *Godan* for the non-Indian English-speaking reader, as do most of the other foreigners whose translations have appeared in the West (see Section 5: "Annotated Bibliography"). Our purpose has been two-fold: first, we have done our versions for the *Indian* reader who has a working knowledge of English and who, for whatever reason (and there are many such reasons), is unable to enjoy Premchand in Hindi. Other readers are invited to eavesdrop and find whatever delight, instruction, and inspiration they can in these translations. (*Seers*, *bighas*, and *maunds*, naturally, are not given their English equivalents, nor are such words as *panchayat* and *chellum*; in fact, the inclusion of an extraordinarily large number of Indian words, precisely defined, in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* has simplified our task by obviating the need for a glossary; these words have not as a rule been italicised, and the curious reader, if in dire straits, has only to consult the giant lexical tome for immediate succour.)

Our second aim has been to be religiously scrupulous. No point repeating the cliché about versions being perversions. There can be ambiguity and argument about what an ideal translation is; there is no ambiguity about our linguistic *modus operandi*. No paraphrases; no omissions of words or of phrases; no attempt to skip, evade, or bypass by giving approximate versions of difficult and obscure

idiomatic lines or words and sentences in dialect; no effort at improvement (which was often a temptation); only very occasional compression of two or more Hindi sentences into a single English sentence, or expansion; and absolutely no adaptation (except in *A Tale of Two Oxen*, the only story in this collection translated solely by P. Lal). It pleases us to think that these translations, a labour of love and loving-care, are as close to the original as one can possibly get. Two challenges were tackled, seriously and with humility. We have specially struggled to capture and reproduce the *tone*—and Premchand's tone can range from light-ironic to dead-serious, from fable-fluent to pedant-propagandist, from romantic-sentimental to sophisticated-cheeky. Special care has also been taken to capture the *atmosphere*, rural and urban. If for no other reason, these new versions should interest anyone involved in the art and craft of translation (and transcreation) simply because no efforts were spared—we had time on our hands and the task was never hurried—to produce an exact and elegant English rendering of Premchand.

It might be advisable to see the task in some of its specifics. Take the case of an "easy" story like *Jail*. In *Jail*, Premchand's Hindi is unadorned, but in places it comes up with remarkable poetic metaphors which need to be sensitively rendered, not merely metronomically equivalenced.

Two examples will give an indication of the way in which we have sometimes preferred transcreation to translation. When Kshama has a premonition that the same disaster that made her a widow might have overtaken Mridula too (in the beginning of part 2 of the story). Premchand expresses her feelings in a sentence that can be translated literally as follows: "From the deepest depths a sort of wave seemed to rise on which her past life seemed to float like broken boats." This had to be rendered as: "A wave of fear rose within her and she saw her past life bobbing like a frail boat on it."

When the pyres are lit Premchand describes the scene with understated vividness. Literally: "From a distance these pyres looked as if God had lit a furnace to forge the future of India." This had to be recast as: "It was a fire-festival lit by the gods in which simmered the auspicious future of India," because the original phrase "*Bhārat kā bhāgya*" ("fate of India") was best expressed in optimistic terms through the use of the word "festival," specially since Hinduism's most important festival of Divali is intimately

connected with fire.

Premchand is so rooted in Indian myth and custom that he often makes casual references to behaviour which can be interpreted only in traditional and symbolic terms. When Mridula describes the death of her son, her immediate emotional reaction is to compare her blood-drenched sari to the red silk sari worn by a Hindu bride on her wedding night. She is so stunned that her next action is almost automatic. In Premchand's words, "*Maine bete ko bāp kī god men leṭā diyā.*" This looks awkward because the normal action would be to place the child *alongside* the dead father. Yet the Hindi is unambiguous—"I laid the child in the lap of his father." This sounds incongruous. We decided to translate it as, "I placed the child on top of his father." This idea was suggested by the ancient Hindu ritual performed by a son at the time of his father's death. There is a specific instance of this in the *Mahabharata* when Vidura dies in the forest and Yudhishtira runs to meet him. According to Iravati Karve in her Sahitya Akademi award-winning study titled *Yuganta* there is a strong likelihood that Yudhishtira is Vidura's son by the custom of the junior levirate which permits the fathering of children by a younger brother-in-law on his childless sister-in-law.

It is clearly mentioned in the *Mahabharata* that Yudhishtira, seeing Vidura on the point of death, lay down on top of him as a son should, with his mouth on Vidura's mouth, and Vidura said, "I give you my breath, my intelligence, my organs, my energy." It is very likely that the symbolic significance of this ritual haunted Premchand and he made his heroine Mridula follow it unconsciously in the deepest emotional crisis of her life.

In the hazardous field of translation, specially of major creative literature, it is always instructive to examine the manner in which different translators go about their work, since no single translation can ever be acclaimed as having the definitive last word. We reproduce below the opening and concluding paragraphs in the original Hindi from two stories, acknowledged Premchand classics, that have stirred the imaginations of two major Indian film directors, *The Chess Players* (filmed by Satyajit Ray as the Bengali *Shatranj Ke Khilari*) and *The Shroud* (from which Mrinal Sen made his Telugu film *Oka Oorie Katha*) along with four different English versions of each.

## THE CHESS PLAYERS

वाजिदअली शाह का समय था। लखनऊ विलासिता के रंग में डूबा हुआ था। छोटे-बड़े, गरीब-अमीर सभी विलासिता में डूबे हुए थे। कोई नृत्य और गान की मजलिस सजाता था, तो कोई अफ्रीम की पीनक ही में मजे लेता था। जीवन के प्रत्येक विभाग में आमोद-प्रमोद का प्राधान्य था। शासन-विभाग में, साहित्य-क्षेत्र में, सामाजिक अवस्था में, कला-कौशल में, उद्योग-धंधों में, आहार-व्यवहार में, सर्वत्र विलासिता व्याप्त हो रही थी। राजकर्मचारी विषय-वासना में, कविगण प्रेम और विरह के वर्णन में, कारीगर कलाबस्तू और चिकन बनाने में, व्यवसायी सुरमे, इत्र, मिस्सी और उबटन का रोजगार करने में लिप्त थे।

सभी की आंखों में विलासिता का मद छाया हुआ था। संसार में क्या हो रहा है, इसकी किसी को खबर न थी। बटेर लड़ रहे हैं। तीतरों की लड़ाई के लिए पाली बदी जा रही है। कहीं चौसर बिछी हुई है; पो-बारह का शोर मचा हुआ है। कहीं शतरंज का घोर संग्राम छिड़ा हुआ है। राजा से लेकर रंक तक इसी धुन में मस्त थे। यहां तक कि फ़कीरों को पैसे मिलते, तो वे रोटियां न लेकर अफ्रीम खाते या मदक पीते। शतरंज, ताश, गंजीफ़ा खेलने से बुद्धि तीव्र होती है, विचार-शक्ति का विकास होता है, पेचीदा मसलों को सुलझाने की आदत पड़ती है। ये दलीलें ज़ोरों के साथ पेश की जाती थीं। (इस सम्प्रदाय के लोगों से दुनिया अब भी खाली नहीं है।)

*(the opening paragraphs)*

It was the age of Wajid Ali Shah, the last ruler of Oudh. Lucknow was sunk in pleasurable pursuits. Small and big, rich and poor, were alike dedicated to sensual joys. One would be devoted to song and dance; another would be enjoying the fumes of opium. In every sphere of life pleasure reigned supreme. Luxury dominated everywhere, in the affairs of the administration, in literature, social organisation, in arts and crafts, industry and commerce and in the conduct and behaviour of people. Government servants were absorbed in the satisfaction of sensual pleasures; poets in themes of love and separation; artisans in gold and linen embroidery; and merchants in the trade of wares like mascara, perfumes, colouring for the teeth and pastes for anointing the body. There was the intoxication of sensual joys in all eyes. Nobody knew what was happening in the world. There were cock-fights; preparations were being made for fights among partridges. Elsewhere the dice were being thrown; there were shouts and excitement. At another place, furious battles raged in the game of chess. Rulers and ruled were



alike drunk with such pleasures. Even beggars on receiving a little charity would not buy bread; instead, they squandered it on opium or some such intoxicant. A game of chess or cards sharpened the wits, developed intellectual power, accustomed one to deal with complicated issues! Such arguments were forcefully expressed and there is no dearth of such people in the world even today!

(P.C. Gupta)

It was during the reign of Wajid Ali Shah. Lucknow was steeped in the pleasures of the flesh. The young and the old, the rich and the poor, all lead a life of self-indulgence. With some, organising nautch and singing parties was the order of the day. Others passed their time smoking opium. Life, as such, was an unending round of conviviality. In high places, in government quarters, in art and literature, in business and industry, in daily social conduct, carnal pleasures had taken deep roots. The high-ups in the government could think of nothing but luxury, the poets wrote only of the outpourings of love and of the pangs of separation from the beloved, the artisans devoted all their energy in making articles of luxury such as brocades, *chikan*, collyrium, attars, powders, face lotions and creams.

Voluptuaries of the deepest hue, they were oblivious to what was happening around them. They watched quail fights, bet on partridges. Here a game of dice was in full swing, to the accompaniment of loud plaudits by the winner of a move. There, a great do-or-die struggle was going on at the chess board. From a prince down to a pauper every one was caught up in these vices. If a beggar was given some alms, instead of buying some *rotis* to appease his hunger he would prefer to spend it on opium or liquor. As for chess and the games of dice, it was argued with great conviction that these games sharpened the mind and improved the power of thinking with consequent advantage in solving the intricate problems of life. (One meets such people even today.)

(*Jai Ratan*: revised version of translation published originally in *Mirror* magazine)

It was the time of Wajid Ali Shah. Lucknow was plunged in pleasures. The young and the old, the poor and the rich—all were pleasure-bent. To kill time, some held dancing parties, others smok-

ed or sipped opium with great gusto in company. Apathy was writ large across every aspect of life: administration, art, literature, industry and social conduct. The state officials were cradled in the lap of luxury; the poets sang of the pangs of love; and the craftsmen were engaged in manufacturing fineries, perfumes and paints. In short, every one of them was wrapped up in voluptuousness, unmindful of the world, its ways and its work. Quail-fights and partridge-fights were wagered upon. There was among the people a passion for the chess-board and the playing-card. From the prince down to the poorest person, every one was caught up in the whirlpool, so much so that when the beggars got as alms any money to buy some bread with, they spent the same on opium. Games like chess are a whetstone for the intellect of the players, who gradually cultivate habit of tackling knotty problems. Arguments for and against are advanced clearly and cogently. (The world is not without such persons even today.)

(*Gurdial Mallik*)

Wajid Ali Shah is on the throne. His capital, Lucknow, a cauldron of pleasures. Big and small, rich and poor wallow in that cauldron. Soirées of song and dance, opiate hubble-bubble parties. . . .Idleness, irresponsibility, indulgence everywhere—in administration, literature, social mores, artistic activities, economic endeavour, in even the mundane intercourse of daily life. Courtiers and palace officers languish in sensual visions, poets sing of love and the anguish of the beloved's absence, embroiderers create wonders with gold thread and with cotton arabesques on fine muslin, and traders do roaring business in kohl, attar, tooth tinctures, and special body-pastes for the massage of ladies.

They go about, eyes glazed with sense-intoxication. They know nothing of what's going on in the outside world. Theirs is a closed whirl of cock-fights and partridge-fights, an endless merry-go-round of merrymaking. Here's a dice game in progress; here's an exultant scream of victory. Over there is a vicious battle of chess. Raja as well as beggar participate, fascinated. It's come to such a pass that you give a few coppers to a fakir, and he doesn't go and buy bread with them, he prefers a few puffs of opium or a swig of country liquor instead. Chess, gambling and the ninety-six-pack card game called *ganjifa* make the mind nimble, they sharpen the powers of discrimination, they facilitate the resolution of complex dilemmas.

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At least that's what they all passionately claim. (There are still many people around nowadays who would endorse that claim.)

(*Nandini Nopany and P. Lal*)

अंधेरा हो चला था। बाजी बिछी हुई थी। दोनों बादशाह अपने-अपने सिंहासनों पर बैठे हुए मानो इन दोनों वीरों की मृत्यु पर रो रहे थे।

चारों तरफ सन्नाटा छाया हुआ था। खंडहर की टूटी हुई मेहराबें, गिरी हुई दीवारें और घूलि-घूसरित मीनारें इन लाशों को देखती और सिर घुनती थीं।

(*the concluding paragraphs*)

Darkness was falling. The chessmen were arranged. The two kings on their respective thrones seemed to be mourning over the deaths of these two heroes.

Silence reigned supreme all round. The crumbling walls of these ruins, their broken arches and minarets lying in the dust seemed to keep watch over these dead bodies and to grieve over them!

(*P.C. Gupta*)

Darkness had descended over the ancient mosque. The chess board was still lying intact on the ground and the two kings looked on gravely from their royal seats, sorrowing over the fate of the two warriors.

Silence reigned over the place. The broken arches of the ruined mosque, its crumbling walls and dust-stained minarets seemed to brood over the corpses lying before them.

(*Jai Ratan*: revised version of translation published originally in *Mirror* magazine)

Darkness was creeping on. The chess-board was set. The two kings of the chess-board sat, as it were, weeping the fate of the two warriors. Silence reigned everywhere. The broken arches, the dilapidated walls and the dust-soiled minarets of the mosque looked at the corpses and nodded!

(*Gurdial Malik*)

The darkness deepens. The chessboard surveys the scene; the two chess kings, ensconced in their thrones, silently mourn the passing-away of these two flowers of Moghul chivalry.

Stillness everywhere. The mosque's crumbling vaults, disintegrat-

ing doors, and dust-suffocated minarets stare in blank bewilderment at the companionate corpses.

*(Nandini Nopany and P. Lal)*

### THE SHROUD

झोंपड़े के द्वार पर बाप और बेटा दोनों एक बुझे हुए अलाव के सामने चुपचाप बैठे हुए हैं और अन्दर बेटे की जवान बीवी बुधिया प्रसव-वेदना से पछाड़ खा रही थी। रह-रहकर उसके मुंह से ऐसी दिल हिला देने वाली आवाज़ निकलती थी, कि दोनों कलेजा थाम लेते थे। जाड़ों की रात थी, प्रकृति सन्नाटे में डूबी हुई, सारा गांव अंधकार में लय हो गया था।

*(the opening paragraph)*

Father and son were sitting silently at the door of their hut by the side of a fire which had gone out. Inside, the son's young wife, Budhiya, was undergoing the pangs of child-birth. Every now and then she gave such piercing cries that the hearts of both seemed to stop beating. It was a winter night; silence reigned all round and the whole village was plunged in darkness.

*(P.C. Gupta)*

One wintry night, near the door of their hut, before a dim and dying fire an old man and his son sat silently. The young daughter-in-law, Budhia, lay inside convulsed with the pains of child-birth. At intervals she cried out in such a heart-rending manner that their breathing seemed to be suspended. The village was wrapped in darkness and all Nature was still.

*(Gurdial Malik)*

At the door of the hut, before a fire which had already gone out, sat, father and son; inside lay Budhia, the son's young wife, in the throes of childbirth. Now and then she would give out wails heartrending enough to upset them.

It was a winter night. Nature seemed dumb, and the village was all but darkness.

*(Madan Gopal)*

Near the door of the hut, father and son sit silent beside the extinct fire in the dry-gourd pot; inside, the son's young wife Budhiya,

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prostrate on the ground, moaning in childbirth. Spasmodic heart-rending cries issue from her lips; father and son hold their breaths. Winter night, stark ubiquitous stillness, village drowned in doom-darkness.

(*Nandini Nopany and P. Lal*)

("Doom-darkness" here needs some explanation. The original is "*andhakār men laya ho gayā hai*"—and *laya* is derived from *pralaya*, the universal dissolution at the end of a yuga. Premchand is building up symbolic significance by his use of this uncommon word.)

और दोनों खड़े होकर गाने लगे—“ठगिनी क्यों नैना झमकावे ! ठगिनी...!”

पियक्कड़ों की आंखें इनकी ओर लगी हुई थीं और यह दोनों अपने दिल में मस्त गाये जाते थे। फिर दोनों नाचने लगे। उछले भी, कूदे भी। गिरे भी, मटके भी। भाव भी बताये, अभिनय भी किये। और आखिर नशे से बदनमस्त होकर वहीं गिर पड़े !

(*the concluding paragraphs*)

Then they both stood up and started singing, "*O deceitful one! Why make eyes at us?*"

The eyes of the drunkards were focussed on these two and they sang merrily, full of their own joy of intoxication. Then they began to dance. They jumped and leapt; they fell down and rolled their eyes. They acted and dramatised emotions. And in the end they sank down dead drunk.

(*P.C. Gupta*)

Both of them suddenly started singing lustily, "*O world-siren, O world-siren, why dost thou wink at us?*"

Then under the influence of liquor, they danced, they got up again, gesticulated and eventually dropped down on the road.

(*Gurdial Malik*)

The two stood up and began to sing: "*Why this witchery of the eyes, O false charmer!*"

The eyes of all the toppers were fixed on them, while the two went on singing, lost in themselves.

Then they began to dance. They bounced and jumped, reeled and wriggled, mimed and mimicked.

And in the end they fell down—dead drunk.

(*Madan Gopal*)

The two stand up and start singing, "Enchantress of the glittering eyes! Enchantress. . . ."

The drunks stare at father and son singing in wanton intoxication. Then both start dancing. Leaping, jumping. They tumble, they teeter, they fall. They gesticulate, they make faces. And then, in drunken torpor, they collapse on the ground.

(Nandini Nopany and P. Lal)

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*Twentyfour Stories*  
*by Premchand*



# *Rich Daughter-in-Law*

## 1

Beni Madhav Singh was the zamindar of Gouripur and Number One man in that village. His grandfather had amassed a huge fortune in cash and land holdings. The village and temple, now in disrepair, stand as visible proofs of his philanthropy and as testimony to his glory. They say at one time an elephant swayed past the temple door; today there is only a decrepit solitary buffalo, a mockery of skin-and-bones but apparently a source of plentiful milk supply for there is always an expectant someone or other waiting with a vessel. Beni Madhav Singh had distributed more than half of his wealth as largesse among a parasitic flock of lawyers and advocates. His present annual unearned income was just a thousand rupees. He had two sons. The elder, Shrikanth Singh, surfaced recently with a Bachelor of Arts degree to his name, after a bout of back-breaking mental application, and he has an office job. The younger, Lal Bihari Singh, was a well-built, handsome young man: imposing eyes, broad chest. He polished off a clean two seers of bubbling-fresh buffalo milk first thing in the morning. Shrikanth Singh was very different. Emaciated by his academic asceticism at the altar of the god called B.A., he was deeply devoted to the doctrines of Ayurveda, the Hindu system of herbal medical science. He was, in fact, an Ayurveda nut. All day and night the mellifluous rustle of pestle grinding herbs into powder in a mortar could be heard in his room. He kept up a regular correspondence with professional *valdyas* in Lahore and Calcutta.

Shrikanth was the proud possessor of a degree in English Literature but that hadn't made him an admirer of the British life-style. On the contrary, he was a confirmed critic of the wickedness of

Western ways. And that made him revered by the villagers. When Dussehra came around, he made it a special point to take part in the Ram-Lila festivities. He in fact was the founder of Gouripur's Ram-Lila celebrations. He never tired of singing the praises of the glories of ancient Indian culture. He was a rigid believer in the sanctity of the joint family. He thought it a familial and national disgrace that the ladies of today should be so unwilling to stay in a joint family. No wonder the young girls of the village found him singularly unpleasant; some even considered him an outright foe. Even his wife didn't see eye to eye with him in this matter. Not because she had any suppressed hostility towards her parents-in-law and brother-in-law, but simply because she felt that, instead of continuing an impossible situation of unending irresolution of family tensions, it was preferable to have a clean break by the establishment of a separate kitchen.

Anandi came from a prosperous and highborn lineage. Her father Bhup Singh possessed a large hereditary estate. Sprawling mansion, elephant, three dogs, hawks and falcons, clusters of chandeliers, honorary magistracy—all the appurtenances of an established landowner were conspicuously visible. A generous man, with an impressive personality. It was just his bad luck to be son-less. Seven daughters—and just his good luck that all survived. The first three he gave away in marriage with great pomp and éclat, but it cost him around Rs 20,000 in promissory notes and dinned in him the virtue of thrift. Anandi, the fourth daughter, the favourite of her father, excelled her sisters in looks and talent. It's natural for parents to have a soft corner for gifted progeny. So it became almost a headache for Thakur Sahib to find a suitable groom for his daughter. He did not want additional debts to pile up, and he did not want to be treated with condescension, either. Shrikanth had come to him one day asking for a donation to the Society for the Propagation of Hindi. Bhup Singh was so profoundly impressed by the young man's behaviour that he arranged for the marriage, with due ostentation, of Anandi with Shrikanth.

Anandi's new home struck her as completely different from her father's place. She found no trace of the kind of lavish show with which she as an unmarried girl had been so familiar. Let alone elephants and horses—they didn't have even a four-wheeled ox-driven carriage. She had brought along her silk slippers, but there was no smooth green lawn to walk on. The new house didn't even have

proper windows; no mosaic on the floor, no paintings on the walls. An unpretentious village house with no frills, but Anandi adjusted to the simplicity of her surroundings gracefully, almost as if she had never had a taste of luxury in her life.

2

One afternoon Lal Bihari Singh turned up with two birds in his hand and said to his elder sister-in-law, "Here, cook these. I'm famished." Anandi had finished cooking and was waiting to serve him. Now she'd have to cook all over again. She checked the ghee: a mere quarter of a seer left in the pot, no more. What would a girl from a rich family know of thrift anyway? She used up all the ghee for the meat. Lal Bihari sat down to eat and found to his surprise that his *dal* was ghee-less. "What's the matter? Why no ghee in the *dal* today?" he asked.

Anandi replied, "I used it all for the meat."

"Only the other day I got the ghee," he said sharply. "Finished so soon?"

"Couldn't have been more than a quarter left for today," replied Anandi. "I told you I used it for the meat."

Just as a dry stick bursts quickly into flame, a hunger-driven man takes offence at trifles. Lal Bihari was appalled by what he thought was impertinence. He snapped, "Of course, rivers of ghee flow at your mother's place, don't they?"

Women swallow a lot of needling and even insult, but no woman will tolerate any snide remarks about her parents. Turning her face away, Anandi said, "You couldn't be more right. Such rivers of ghee, we distribute bucketsful to low-caste barbers and water-carriers."

Lal Bihari exploded and flung the *thali* away violently. "I could tear your tongue out for saying that."

Not outdone, Anandi, flushed with rage, said, "If only my husband were here, he'd show you!"

This was too much for the uneducated and unthinking Thakur. His own wife was a very ordinary Zamindar's daughter and he treated her with sexist arrogance. He picked up his wooden slipper and hurled it in Anandi's direction. "You think no end of him, don't you?" he shouted. "Well, let him come, and I'll show him."

Anandi fended off the slipper with her hand; it narrowly missed

her forehead. She sprained a finger in the encounter. Trembling like a leaf in a storm, she strode angrily back to her room. A woman's strength, courage, honour, prestige—all revolve around her husband; her hope lies in her husband's valour and virility. She swallowed her pride, and waited.

3

It was Shrikanth Singh's routine to return home on Saturdays. After the incident—which took place on Thursday—Anandi remained sullenly cooped up in herself for two days. She refused to have any food or water. She simply waited for her husband to turn up. As usual, he came, punctually on Saturday evening; he relaxed in the courtyard, carrying on a desultory conversation about the general state of the nation and the new court cases in which he was involved. This went on till about ten o'clock. These topics so fascinated the literate gentlefolk of the village that they forgot all about their and others' mealtimes; and it would have been impolite for Shrikanth to cut short the confabulation. Anandi patiently suffered through these couple of hours. Finally, it was time for the evening meal. The meeting broke up. Lal Bihari took this opportunity to say, "Brother, please be so good as to tell your wife to hold her tongue, or there will be trouble."

Beni Madhav sided with his younger son. "He's right. Girls should know better than to bandy words with menfolk."

Lal Bihari: "She may come from a rich family, but we're not outcastes, are we?"

Worried, Shrikanth asked, "Will somebody tell me what's wrong?"

Lal Bihari replied, "Nothing. It's just that she exploded, without warning. She thinks only of her parents. After all, what are we compared to them?"

Shrikanth finished his meal and went to Anandi. She was seething. Her husband was no less agitated.

Anandi asked, "How are you?"

Shrikanth replied, "Fine. Just fine. But what's this I hear about the hell you've let loose in the house?"

Anandi's brow creased with wrinkles. She couldn't contain the smouldering resentment inside her. "I don't know who's worked you up, but if I did, I'd burn his tongue!"

Shrikanth: "What's there to be so upset about? Just let me have the facts."

Anandi: "What's there to say? It's my fate. Or why would a village bumpkin who isn't fit to be a peon dare to throw a wooden slipper at me?"

Shrikanth: "Why don't you just tell me what happened? I'm completely in the dark."

Anandi: "Day before yesterday your darling brother asked me to cook meat. There was only a quarter-seer of ghee in the pot. I put it all in the meat. He sits down to eat and the first thing he says is, 'Why isn't there any ghee in the *dal*?' That's it. And then he launches into a tirade against my parents. I lost my temper. I said that a quarter-seer of ghee is what we would give to our barbers and water-carriers, and we don't make a big show of it. And you know what your brother did—he flung his wooden slipper at me! If I hadn't blocked it with my hand, he'd have cracked my skull. Go and ask him if what I say is true or false."

Shrikanth's eyes flamed in anger. He said, "The check of that upstart!"

Anandi—she was a woman, after all—burst into sobs. Shrikanth was a patient, gentle person who rarely lost his head. Feminine tears add fuel to the fire of male anger. He tossed restless the whole night, unable to get a wink of sleep.

First thing next morning he went to his father and said, "Father, I don't think I can stay in this house any more."

How often had Shrikanth felt ashamed when some of his friends spoke such harsh language. Just his bad luck that he had now to use such bitter words himself. Nothing so easy as giving advice to others.

Beni Madhav Singh looked very worried. "Why?" he asked.

Shrikanth: "Because I value my own dignity. Your house is too full of injustice and bitterness. Those who should know how to respect their elders, are doing the exact opposite. My work keeps me out of the house most of the time. When my back is turned, slippers and shoes are hurled at the ladies of this house. It's not just quarrels any more. I can tolerate many things, I can understand many things—but I will not tolerate and I do not understand violence."

Beni Madhav Singh was nonplussed. Shrikanth had always shown him the deepest respect. Shrikanth's emphatic stand bewildered him. He said, however, "You are an intelligent young man, my son."



How can you say such things? You know the ways of women. Whole families are ruined by their tantrums. Why are you encouraging this?"

Shrikanth: "I am not a fool. I know about women. You know I advise the villagers about their family problems, and they think I am a help. But when it comes to the case of a lady for whose honour and dignity I have to answer to God, I find myself helpless! I will not tolerate such injustice, such bestiality! Believe me, it's galling enough that I can't even punish Lal Bihari."

It was now Beni Madhav's turn to lose his temper. Enough was enough. He said, "Lal Bihari's your brother. Tweak his ears if you must when he does wrong, but. . ."

Shrikanth: "I don't consider Lal Bihari my brother any more."

Beni Madhav: "You mean you put your wife first?"

Shrikanth: "No, sir. But I will have nothing to do with mean, cruel and unscrupulous behaviour."

Both were silent. The Thakur Sahib wanted to calm his son down, but he had no intention of acknowledging any misdemeanour on Lal Bihari's part. Meanwhile a group of friends and acquaintances from the village turned up on the pretext of having a companionate smoking session on the *chellum* and hookah. The ladies were delighted when they heard the rumour that Shrikanth was having a head-on clash with his father on the subject of his wife. They could hardly contain their eagerness to hear both sides of the case. And there was the mischievous segment of villagers who, never liking the idea of seeing harmony in Beni Madhav's family, used to say, "Shrikanth's a mouse. He's not really learned, he's only a bookworm. And Beni Madhav Singh is a fool—he should know better than running to him for advice in every little matter."

These noble sentiments finally bore bitter fruit in the family's dissensions. Some were there for the pretended puff on the hookah, and others on the excuse of giving the rent receipt. Beni Madhav was an unbending, conservative type, not one to knuckle under innuendo and sarcasm. He made up his mind that, come what may, he certainly was not going to become a target of abuse for such petty people. He said gently, "Son, we are one family. He has done wrong, I admit. Now it's up to you."

The irritated raw young graduate from Allahabad University could make neither head nor tail of this. He was expert in the art of debating in clubs, but this sleight of mind left him high and dry.

He simply could not fathom his father's intention. He said, "I am sorry. I cannot stay in the same house with Lal Bihari."

Beni Madhav: "My son, wise men ignore the words of fools. He is not mature, you know that. You are elder, after all; forgive him."

Shrikanth: "I will not, will not, will not put up with his wickedness! Make up your mind. Either he stays, or I stay. If you love him that much, let me leave; I can look after myself. If you want me here, tell him plainly he can go wherever he wants to go. That's my final decision."

Lal Bihari was standing near the door, overhearing every word. He respected his elder brother. He never had the courage even to sit on the same *charpoy* with his brother, or smoke the hookah or chew *pan* in his presence. You could say he honoured his brother even more than he did his father. Shrikanth's fraternal affection was no less; he had never knowingly frowned even once at his brother. Each time he returned from Allahabad he brought a token gift for Lal Bihari. He had a pair of wrestling maces specially ordered. Last year, on Nag-Panchami, the fifth day of the bright half of the month of Shravan, when Lal Bihari had humbled a wrestler double his size, Shrikanth had run forward, embraced his brother in the wrestling pit itself, and celebrated the victory by disbursing five rupees in small coins to beggars.

And now—to hear such words, from such a brother—it was an excruciating experience for Lal Bihari. He burst into uncontrollable sobs. He was contrite all right—no doubt of that. His heart had started thumping a day in advance of his brother's arrival. *What will brother say? How can I face him? How will I ever look him in the eye again?* He found Shrikanth hard and unfeeling as a stone image. He was a bit of a fool; he kept telling himself that his brother was doing him wrong. He would not have minded so much had Shrikanth summoned, scolded, and even slapped him. But for his own brother to say that he did not want to see Lal Bihari's face ever again—this was the ultimate humiliation. Still in tears, he retired to his room. He changed, and wiped his face carefully so that no one would suspect. He went to Anandi's room and said, "*Bhabhi*, brother says he won't stay in the same house with me. He doesn't want to see me ever again. Give me leave to go, *bhabhi*. I will never show my face here again. Please forgive whatever wrongs I have done."

He couldn't finish; he choked on his words.

4

While Lal Bihari Singh was standing, head bent in penitence, in front of Anandi, Shrikanth Singh suddenly turned up, his eyes still blazing with anger. Seeing his brother, he swiftly turned his face away; his eyes filled with disgust, and he left, consciously avoiding Lal Bihari's presence, as if afraid of his brother's polluting shadow.

Anandi had complained of Lal Bihari's misbehaviour, but she now regretted her action. She had a forgiving nature, and she could never imagine the molehill would become such an Everest. She was a little perturbed by the explosive reaction of her husband; she was also worried about what to do in case he decided to move to Allahabad. On top of that, when she heard her brother-in-law standing at the door and saying remorsefully, "I will never show my face here again. Please forgive whatever wrongs I have done," all her bitterness softened. She began sobbing. What better liquefaction is there than tears to wash away soul-soil?

Seeing Shrikanth, Anandi said, "Lala's outside; he's crying."

Shrikanth: "Why tell me?"

Anandi: "Call him in. May fire scald my tongue for saying the things I said! Why did I have to start all this family trouble?"

Shrikanth: "I'm not going to call him."

Anandi: "You'll regret it. He's desperate. Supposing he means what he says, and really goes away?"

Shrikanth did not respond. Lal Bihari said, "*Bhabhi*, give my *pranams* to brother. He doesn't want to see my face, so I won't show him my face ever again."

Saying this, he made as if to go; then, swiftly, he strode towards the courtyard door. Anandi went quickly after him and held his hand. Lal Bihari looked back; his eyes were brimming with tears. "Let me go," he said.

Anandi: "Go where?"

Lal Bihari: "Where no one will ever see my face."

Anandi: "No, I won't let you."

Lal Bihari: "I'm not worthy of living with you."

Anandi: "Swear by me, you're not leaving. Not one more step!"

Lal Bihari: "I will not stay in this house until I am convinced my brother harbours no grudge against me."

Anandi: "With God as my witness, I tell you I have nothing against you."

Forgiveness overcame Shrikanth. He stepped out of the room and embraced Lal Bihari. The two brothers wept unashamedly.

Sobbing, Lal Bihari said, "Brother, never say again that you don't want to see my face. I'll take any punishment, but not that."

His voice trembling, Shrikanth replied, "Lallu! Forget all that happened. God willing, it will never happen again."

Beni Madhav Singh entered just then; he saw the two brothers embracing each other. Joy filled him; he said, "Girls from good families are like that. They heal and mend."

Whoever in the village heard of the incident, had only this to say of Anandi: "It's expected of a girl from a good family, isn't it?"

# *The Panchayat is the Voice of God*

## 1

There couldn't be friends closer to each other than Jumman Sheikh and Alagu Choudhuri. They are farm-partners; each also had a share in a loan-and-credit small business. Full faith in each other—naturally. When Jumman went on hajj, he left his house in Alagu's charge. Which is exactly what Alagu did when *he* had to be away for any reason: he would entrust his house to Jumman. They never ate at each other's—Jumman was a devout Muslim and Alagu an equally fervent Hindu—yet there was a special rapport between them, a meeting of minds which, of course, is the real root of friendship.

It all began when they were still children. It was Jumman's father, Jumrati, who personally taught them the basics of reading and writing. Alagu served his guru-ji studiously, washing all his food plates, cleaning his cups and bowls, taking care to see his hookah never went unfilled—for a good reason: each hookah-filling service gave him a minimum half-hour of permissible truancy. Alagu's father was one of those die-hard, conservative types. His idea of education was simple: complete dedication to the guru. It wasn't books that mattered; any achievement worth having came via the blessing of the guru. Yes, that was it: the grace-filled gaze of the guru. The way his mind worked was: If, for whatever reason, Alagu failed to derive the full benefit of Jumrati Sheikh's benediction and holy presence, he at least had spared no effort to give Alagu the right education; it simply was not in Alagu's stars to be educated.

Actually, Jumrati was not capable of giving such gentle guru-blessings. He wielded the stick and the cane. His strictness was passed on to his son, as a result of which Jumman earned the admi-

ring puja of the neighbouring village folk. No court scribe would dare challenge a mortgage deed or other legal document drafted by Jumman. The local postman, the constable, the peon of the revenue office—all longed to be in his good books. Alagu was respected for his money, and Jumman Sheikh was revered for his very special wisdom.

2

Jumman Sheikh had an elderly aunt who possessed some landed property. She had no close kin. With a lot of big promises, Jumman sweet-talked her into signing over the land to him. Till the gift deed was actually registered, Jumman chutneyfied his dear aunt with lavish displays of consanguineous care. What tasty viands he placed before her: ceaseless showers of *halwa* and pilau. . . . But the minute the seal of registration was stamped on the document, the ceaseless culinary flow also got sealed. Now the *rotis* served to her were laced with bitter spice from the tart tongue of Jumman's wife, Kariman. As for Jumman Sheikh—he suddenly developed a hard heart. There was nothing left for Aunt to do except smile and bear the taunts, which were varied and numerous.

"The old hag thinks she's going to live for ever!" "All she's given us is a couple of useless *bighas*, and she thinks she's bought us up!" "The witch can't down her *rotis* without spiced *dal*!" "With the money we've spent filling her baggy belly, we could have bought up the whole village."

She tolerated the spitefulness as long as she could. Finally she complained to Jumman. Jumman said it wasn't proper for menfolk to interfere with the domestic problems of the lady of the house. And so the whining and the weeping went on for a few days more. Then, making up her mind, she said one day, "*Beta*, I can't live with you any more. Please give me the money I need, and I'll manage my own kitchen."

Jumman replied rudely, "Money? What money? Does money grow on trees?"

His aunt said gently, "I need only a dry and decent something, that's all."

Jumman's reply was grave. "You're so close to death, what more do you need anyway?"

His aunt was so upset that she threatened to take the matter to

the *panchayat*. Jumman snickered, as a hunter does when he sees a deer scamper straight into a trap. He said, "Go ahead. Go to the village council. Let them decide. I don't like this night-and-day bickering any more than you do."

Jumman knew only too well in whose favour the *panchayat* would decide. Was there anyone in the near and even distant vicinity who was not indebted to him in one way or another? Who'd like to be on the wrong side of Jumman Sheikh? Who had the guts to look him straight in the eye? The *panchayat* wasn't made up of angels from the sky.

3

For many days after this the old aunt, back bent like a bow, staff in hand, visited the neighbouring villages. Each step was torture; but she had made up her mind. The matter had to be settled once for all.

There was hardly a person to whom she did not narrate her tale of woe. Some gave her the usual lip sympathy, and others blamed her misfortune on the cruelty of the modern age, saying to each other, "She's got one foot in her grave; she'll go any day. But she won't let go!" Then, turning to her, "What do you need at your age? Take the name of Allah and eat your meals peacefully. What do *you* have to do with property?"

And, of course, there were the so-called gentlefolk who found in all this a splendid feast of mocking fun. And why not?—it was a ridiculous sight surely—bent back, shrivelled face, dry-as-hemp hair. . . .

Very few indeed were the justice-loving, generous, charitable souls who listened carefully to the helpless woman's woes and gave her solace.

After many rounds of fruitless wandering she came to Alagu Choudhuri. She dropped her staff with a clatter and, taking a deep breath, said, "Come if you can to my *panchayat*, son, even if for a short while."

Alagu: "Why me? There will be so many from all the villages."

Aunt: "I've told my sad story to all of them. It's up to them to come or not."

Alagu: "All right, I'll be there. But don't expect me to say anything before the *panchayat*."

Aunt: "Why not?"

Alagu: "Now what do you expect me to say to that? It's just that I can't. Jumman's an old friend. I can't say anything against him."

Aunt: "Son, will you allow injustice rather than hurt a friend?"

Loss of dharma doesn't affect a sleeping man; but when his conscience is pricked he stirs into action, into righteous self-vindication. Alagu had no reply to give her, but her words throbbed in his mind: "Will you allow injustice rather than hurt a friend?"

4

The *panchayat* began its deliberations one evening, under a tree. Jumman Sheikh had earlier spread a large mat to prepare for the meeting. He had made all the arrangements for *pan*, cardamom, hookahs, and wads of chewing tobacco. True, he himself sat with Alagu Choudhuri, at some distance. As each villager came, Jumman Sheikh greeted him with a restrained salaam. At sunset a cackle of clerical birds held court in the branches of the tree; below the branches sat the council of humans. They sat on the mat; not an inch of space was left. The majority were spectators. Among the invited only those came who bore some grudge against Jumman. In one corner a large fire had been lit. The barber went about incessantly filling up the *chellums*. It was hard to tell which gave out more smoke—the burning cowdung fuel cakes or the puffing of the *chellums*. Children ran about here and there. Some were abusing each other, and others were crying. General confusion all around. Packs of village dogs had turned up, under the impression there was feasting going on.

The five *panchayat* members sat down. Jumman's aunt presented her case:

"Members of the *panchayat*, three years ago I signed over my entire property to my sister's son Jumman Sheikh. You are all surely aware of this. Jumman agreed to provide me food, shelter and clothing. I managed somehow to pass a year on these terms. But I cannot any more carry on in this humiliating fashion. He refuses now to give me sufficient food, nor do I get adequate clothing. I'm a helpless widow. I can't afford to go to the court or to any other authority. I can narrate my list of woes to none but you. I will gladly walk on whatever path you show me. If you find I am in the wrong, slap me. If you find Jumman guilty of misbehaviour, please



ask him why he is tormenting a poor, defenceless widow like me. I will accept without question any decision of the illustrious members of the *panchayat*."

Jumman Sheikh had given employment to some tenants of Ramdhan Mishra, who now spoke up. "Jumman-mian, who are your nominees for the *panchayat*? Let's decide this now. And let's agree that the *panchayat*'s decision will be final."

Jumman at this point saw in the audience only those members for whom he had, for whatever reason, some enmity. He said, "The voice of the *panchayat* is the voice of Allah. Let my aunt nominate whoever she wishes. I have no objection."

His aunt shouted, "If you are that great a disciple of Allah, why don't *you* tell me the names of your *panchayat* nominees? I have a right to know."

Jumman burst out angrily, "I will not speak one word more. You go ahead. Name any person of your choice."

His aunt sensed the sarcasm in his words and said, "Child, have you no fear of God? The *panchayat* fears none, favours none. The things you say! I don't care who else you trust and who you don't—but surely you have faith in Alagu Choudhuri, don't you? So, I name him head of the *panchayat*."

Jumman was overjoyed, but he took care to control his feelings, and said, "I agree. Let Alagu be head. Ramdhan or Alagu—I'm happy with either."

Alagu had no desire to get involved in what he feared might turn out to be a rigmarole. He evaded the issue. "Aunt," he said, "you know Jumman and I are close friends."

His aunt replied very seriously, "Child, one doesn't compromise principles because one has friends. God dwells in the heart of the *panchayat*. And when the council members speak, it is as if God is speaking through them."

So Alagu Choudhuri became head of the *panchayat*. Ramdhan Mishra and others who were hostile to Jumman Sheikh cursed the old lady in their hearts.

Alagu Choudhuri said, "Sheikh Jumman, you and I are old friends. You've always been a friend in need, and I have always done my best for you. But in this matter, as far as I am concerned, you and your aunt are on the same level. You are free to put the facts of your case before the *panchayat* members."

Jumman was completely confident that he would win. *Alagu's*

*putting on an act.* He said calmly, "Members of the *panchayat*, three years ago my aunt signed over her property to me. I agreed to give her food, shelter, and clothing. As God is my witness, I have tried to see that she was in no way ever inconvenienced. I look upon her as my mother. It is my duty to serve her. But you know that women never get along too well with each other. How am I to blame for that? My aunt now wants the earlier arrangement changed into a monthly allowance for her. The *panchayat* knows the value of her property. I don't get such large returns from it as will justify a monthly allowance. Besides, the gift deed makes no provision for any monthly allowance. If it did, I would never have agreed to accept the property. This is my submission. You are the *panchayat*; it is up to you to decide."

Alagu Choudhuri had always to go to the courts for one reason or other. He knew all the ins and outs of law. He started cross-examining Jumman with the expertise of a lawyer. Each question thudded on Jumman's heart with the force of a hammer, and gave an ecstatic thrill to Ramdhan Mishra. Jumman could not for the life of him make out why Alagu was behaving in that way. *What's the matter with him—why is he asking all these awkward questions? Such a turnabout—and so suddenly! Why is he so eager to discredit me in front of everyone? Who knows what secret grudge he's been harbouring against me? Strange—this longstanding friendship of ours—no help at all now?*

While Jumman Sheikh was worrying in this way, Alagu announced the *panchayat's* decision.

"Jumman Sheikh, the members of the *panchayat* have carefully deliberated over the facts of the case. It is our considered opinion that your aunt should be given a monthly maintenance allowance. We feel that the property provides sufficient return to enable you to grant her such a monthly allowance. Our decision is unanimous. If Jumman does not abide by it, the gift deed will be treated as null and void."

The verdict stunned Jumman. *One's own friend, behaving like an enemy, cutting one's throat—what else could that be except the bitter fruit of these topsy-turvy times. The one person whom I thought I could trust completely—and he let me down! It's these occasions that are the test of friendship. But Alagu is a fairweather friend of these debased modern times of Kali-Yuga. If there were no tricky and deceitful people like him, the world would be a better place.*

*Cholera and plague and other epidemics are surely the consequences of such immoral conduct.*

But Ramdhan Mishra and the other members of the *panchayat* were all praise for the bold and just pronouncement of Alagu Choudhuri. They said, "That's what a *panchayat* should be. It separates milk from water. A friend is a friend, but above friendship is dharma. It's the truth-speakers who keep the world stable. If it weren't for them, the world would have submerged by now in the sixth, the lowest circle of the underworld hell."

The *panchayat* verdict sundered the bond of Jumman's and Alagu's friendship. They wouldn't even talk to each other. A single blow of truth had felled a giant tree of friendship! A giant tree, but rooted in sand.

From then on, it was only polite formalities between them: all ceremony, courtesy, and surface sweetness. They met; but as sword meets shield.

The perfidy rankled in Jumman's mind night and day. His one mission in life now was: "When will I get my own back?"

5

Good deeds take their own slow time; bad deeds ripen swiftly. Sooner than he expected, Jumman found his opportunity. Last year Alagu Choudhuri had bought a pair of splendid bullocks from Batesar. They were a special north-western breed—really handsome specimens, with grand, long horns—such divine creatures that villagers from far and near flocked to have their darshan. Now it so happened that, a month after the *panchayat* decided the Jumman-Alagu case, one of the bullocks suddenly died.

Jumman began telling his friends, "See, the fruits of betrayal! A man may suffer wrong patiently, but God can tell what's virtue and what's vice." Alagu suspected Jumman of poisoning the bullock; his wife went further—she was convinced of Jumman's guilt. She said to her husband, "It's all his doing." There was a wordy war on this issue one day between Jumman's wife Kariman and Alagu's wife, a heated, bloodless-billows-of-bitterness exchange. Irony, sarcasm, innuendo, malicious maxims, carping comparisons—what a display of rhetorical rhodomontade. It was with great effort that Jumman succeeded in restoring some peace among the battling harridans. He browbeat his wife down, and literally dragged her

away from the arena of conflict. Meanwhile Alagu softened his own wife, overwhelming her with incontrovertible legal logic.

What good was a single bullock? Alagu searched for a companion bullock high and low, but in vain. In the end he was advised to sell off his bullock. There was a buggy-driver in the village called Samjhu Sahu, whose main work was to transport a carriage-load of molasses and ghee to sell in the bazar and return with an *ikka*-full of oil and salt, for sale in the village. He took a fancy to the bullock. He thought: *If I could yoke this bullock to my carriage, I could easily make three rounds every day. These days I'm lucky if I can do a single round well!* He inspected the bullock, yoked him, gave him a trial run, approved hair health and general physical condition, got him weighed, haggled the price right, and tethered him finally to his door post. He agreed to make full payment within a month. Alagu Choudhuri was only too eager to sell, even at a slight loss.

Samjhu Sahu really worked that poor bullock to death. Three rounds a day; then four. Inadequate feed, insufficient water; only the daily rounds mattered! He'd drive the bullock to the bazar, and dump him with a handful of dry hay. Before the bullock could get his breath back, he was yoked for another round. In Alagu Choudhuri's house, on the other hand, he used to be Sir Bullock; there, at least, he had a taste of some flute-lilting peace. There he would sometimes be yoked to a plough. When this was done, he frisked delightedly all over the field. There Sir Bullock had plentiful feed, clean water, lightly ground *arrhar* pulses, and hay enriched with oil-cakes; sometimes he even got a lovely lick of ghee. There he had a servant whose sole job was to currycomb him once in the morning and once at night. He would get washed and caressed. . . . What a world of difference between that life of heavenly calm and this twentyfour hour hell! In just one month he was beaten to a frazzle. The very sight of the buggy was enough to dry the blood in his veins. Each step he took hurt. His bones showed through his skin, but he had his dignity and there was a limit to how much he would put up with silently.

One day, Sahu-ji doubled his load while sending him out on his fourth round. He'd been worked so hard the whole day, he could hardly move. Then Sahu-ji began whipping him. The bullock spurted furiously ahead; paused to get his wind back; but Sahu-ji was in a tearing hurry, and continued to beat him mercilessly. The bullock

galloped once more; but this was literally his last gasp. He collapsed in a heap, never to rise again. Sahu-ji flogged him, twisted his leg, shoved a stick inside his nostrils; but how is it possible to revive a corpse? Then an idea struck Sahu-ji—looking intently at the bullock, he unyoked the dead beast, wondering all the time how the buggy would ever reach home. He shouted and screamed, but a village road is like a baby's eye: come evening, and it goes to sleep. There was no one in sight. There wasn't another village for miles around. In blind fury he lashed again at the dead animal and started cursing, "Wretch! Couldn't you have chosen to die after reaching home! The bastard, he has to drop dead midway! Who'll pull my buggy back to the village?"

He ranted and raved. He had sold many bags of molasses and many tins of ghee, and he had a couple of hundred rupees tied in his waist-knot. The buggy was loaded with several bags containing salt, which meant he couldn't abandon it there on the road and leave. There was nothing else he could do: he curled up inside the buggy, deciding to pass as comfortable a wakeful night as he could there. He lit his *chellum*, chanted a few snatches of folk songs, and smoked his hookah. Half the night passed in this restless fashion. He tried his best to keep awake; but he dozed off; at crack of dawn he opened his eyes, and immediately felt his waistknot. It was gone! The money wasn't there! He looked wildly right and left. Many of the oil canisters were also missing. He beat his head in futile rage. When he reached home that morning, his wife listened to his tale of sorrows and said, "It's all the fault of Alagu Choudhuri. That wretch dumps this hag of a bull on you, and look at all the loss he's put you to!"

## 6

All this happened many months ago. When Alagu came to collect his due payments, both wife and husband yapped at him like rabid dogs, making incoherent accusations, "Wah! All our life's savings lost, we're doomed, and here he comes demanding his payment! Why did you palm off a dead bullock on us? You want payment for a corpse? You throw dust in our eyes, you tie a dead bullock round our necks, you think we're so silly and stupid we can't see what you are doing! We're born of *bania* stock, let me tell you that! Go and look for fools elsewhere, if you must! Go wash your

face first in a clay pot before you become clean enough to ask us for money. If that doesn't appeal to you, untie our bullock and take him away. Work him for two months to cover your month's due payment. What more do you want?"

Alagu Choudhuri had a large following of ill-wishing maligners who were delighted at what had happened. They got together and chortled at the discomfiture of Alagu. But two hundred rupees is a not-easily-forgotten sum. Once Alagu also lost his temper, and Sahu-ji rushed home to get hold of a *lathi*. Next it was the wife of Sahu-ji who entered the arena. First the questions; then the bickering; then fisticuffs. Sahu-ji's wife retreated inside her house, and barred all the doors. The noise drew many villagers to the scene. Attempts at placation, at conciliation. They consoled Sahu-ji and persuaded him to come out. It was their suggestion that things could not continue as they were, and that the *panchayat* would have to be called. The *panchayat* decision would have to be binding on both parties. Sahu-ji agreed. So did Alagu.

7

Preparations once again for the *panchayat*. Both sides start canvassing supporters. On the third day, in the evening, the *panchayat* convened under the same tree. A concatenation of crows were holding their own meeting in the open field. Their topic of debate: did they have a proprietary right over the pea-patch? —and till the matter was decided, they felt it was necessary to express their extreme cawing displeasure over the attempts by the field's caretaker to drive them off. The general feeling among the feathered denizens of the treetops was that members of the *homo sapiens* tribe had no right to prohibit the activities of birds when they were themselves only too adept at creating differences even among the best of human friends.

When the *panchayat* began deliberations, Ramdhan Mishra said, "Why the delay now? Let's choose the council members. Come, Choudhuri, tell us—who are your nominees?"

Alagu said humbly, "Let Samjhu Sahu make the choice."

Samjhu stood up and said sternly, "My choice is Juman Sheikh."

The mention of Jumman Sheikh's name set Alagu Choudhuri's heart thudding, as if someone had suddenly slapped him. Ramdhan was Alagu's friend; he asked discreetly, "What's wrong, Alagu

Choudhuri? Have you any objection?"

Choudhuri replied helplessly, "No, no objection. Why should I have any?"

A sharp sense of one's responsibility is invariably one of the best ways to correct one's behaviour if it ever deviates from the path of rectitude. When one strays, this is the one trustworthy beacon that can light our way.

Courage and freedom come easy to a newspaper editor ensconced in his haven of a home; it is easy to assault the fortress of parliament from a distance; but a very different kind of criticism takes place if he is personally present and involved with the workings of the ministerial caucus. Then, how full of insight his writings become, how profound, how concerned with the values of justice. For they now proceed from his deep concern, his sense of committed responsibility. How easy is it for a young man to be arrogant and reckless; his parents are always a little anxious, always a little afraid that he might turn out to be the black sheep of the family. But soon enough, when the burden of maintaining his family falls on him, this unable-to-manage, callow youth becomes extraordinarily hard-working and poised. You could describe this also as the fruits of accepting one's responsibility.

So also with Jumman Sheikh: as soon as he accepted the headship of the *panchayat*, a new awareness of his duties dawned on him. He said to himself: *I am now the arbiter of justice and dharma. What I say will be accepted as a divine fiat, and I cannot allow my private prejudices to influence the sanctity of the divine word. I must not depart by a hair's-breadth from truth.*

The cross-examination started. Each side kept fervently justifying its version of the case. There seemed to be general agreement that Samjhu should pay the full amount due. But two among them opined that special note should be taken of the fact that Samjhu had suffered financial loss. Two others were in favour of deterrent punishment being meted out to Samjhu in order to prevent any recurrence of brutal cruelty to dumb animals. Jumman pronounced the *panchayat's* decision:

"Alagu Choudhuri and Samjhu Sahu! The *panchayat* has very carefully deliberated the pros and cons of your case. In the interests of justice, it is proper that Samjhu Sahu should pay the full price of the bullock he purchased from Alagu Choudhuri. The bullock was suffering from no ailment at the time Samjhu agreed to buy

him. Had the full price been paid on the spot as soon as the deal was struck, this problem would not have risen at all today. The bullock perished because he was overworked, and no proper provision was made for his provender."

Ramdhan Mishra said, "Samjhu beat the poor beast to death; he deserves to be punished."

Jumman replied, "That's a different story. It's outside the purview of the *panchayat*."

Jhagru Sahu said, "But Samjhu's case should be considered leniently."

Jumman replied, "That rests with Alagu Choudhuri. He can be as lenient as his goodness allows him."

Alagu Choudhuri, elated, stood up and loudly proclaimed, "Long live the *panchayat*! *Panch-Parameshwar ki jai!*"

The words echoed back from the assembled crowd: "*Panch-Parameshwar ki jai!*"

Every single man there had the highest praise for Jumman's noble conduct. "This is the essence of justice! This is not in the hands of man, but in the divine spirit that dwells in the hearts of the *panchayat*; this is the glory of God. Who can pass off fake as real in front of the wisdom of the *panchayat*?"

Later Jumman went over to Alagu and embraced him warmly. "Brother," he said, "you may not know it, but ever since you gave your verdict against me I became your bitterest enemy. Today I have discovered a great truth—I have seen that when you become one of the *panchayat*, you are no one's friend and no one's enemy. You are there only to dispense justice. Today I have realised that God speaks through the *panchayat*."

Alagu broke down and wept. The tears washed away the bitterness in the hearts of both. The faded creeper burst again into leaf and flower.



# *The Competitors*

## 1

Three generations of hate embittered the relationship of Jokhu Bhagat and Bechan Choudhuri. It began with a petty misunderstanding. Then violence took over, and some of their forefathers bloodied each other up. Litigation was part and parcel of their growing up. Matters went all the way up to the High Court; and as the children grew the feud worsened; so much so that it nearly impoverished them. Time was when each had a half share in the village; now there was only a sliver of disputed land left. Land, wealth, prestige—all gone. The feud continued, vicious as ever. All the finest hair-splitting lawyers of the High Court failed to resolve this low quarrel.

These two gentlemen split the village into two warring camps. One camp drank bhang at the Choudhuri's house, the other smoked hemp at Bhagat's. Even the ladies and children took sides. And so a clear line of demarcation divided even their social behaviour, their very dharma. The Choudhuri would dress for his simple meal of ground parched gram and call Bhagat a hypocrite. Bhagat would not undress even when drinking water and would brand the Choudhuri a rake. Bhagat was a confirmed traditionalist, a follower of the Eternal Dharma; and the Choudhuri was a firm believer in the "progressive" ideals of the Arya Samaj. The Choudhuri did business with cloth dealers, grocers and fruit-vendors—all of which Bhagat thought very *infra dig*. The Choudhuri thought no better of Bhagat's sweetmeat maker, milkman, and oil supplier. Their ill health was even more instructive—Bhagat believed in local doctors and Ayurvedic drugs, and the Choudhuri was a diehard devotee of allopathy.

2

When the river of political upheaval began overflowing its banks, ripples reached the village as well. The Choudhuri supported the nationalist movement, Bhagat was pro-British. Along comes a political worker and establishes a Farmers' Association in the village; the Choudhuri becomes an active member, Bhagat stays away. Political consciousness grows, self-rule is discussed. The Choudhuri champions self-government, Bhagat favours foreign rule. There's always a knot of self-rule supporters at the Choudhuri's house, and a club of foreign rule fanatics at Bhagat's.

One day the Choudhuri began expounding his views on the subject: "Friends, the essence of Swarajya is self-rule. I ask you, what's better—that we rule our own country or that others lord it over us?"

The crowd roared back, "Self-rule—we want self-rule!"

The Choudhuri: "And how are we going to get this Swarajya? By our own efforts, by our own strength, by being united, by wiping out petty prejudices. . . .Let's solve our problems ourselves."

A voice from the crowd: "But you are always hanging around the law courts."

The Choudhuri: "What's that? I used to, but not anymore. I made up my mind today. If you ever see me in a law court now, may the sin of cow-killing fall on me. Let me tell you what needs to be done. All your hard-earned money, spend it on your family, your children—feed them well, look after them. What remains, use it for the welfare of others. Why do you fill the pockets of cheap advocates and lawyers? Why do you bribe the police officials? Why do you cringe and cower in front of authority? There was a time when our children were given the right education in their own dharma; they were brought up to be straight and sacrificing and strong. And now, what do they do? They pick up foreign ideas and hanker after cushy jobs, they demand bribes, they fool around, they mock their ancestors and their gods, they smoke cigarettes, wear long hair, and kiss the feet of their rulers. Isn't it the essence of duty that we give our children a firm grounding in dharma?"

The crowd: "We'll collect funds and open a school."

The Choudhuri: "There was a time, friends, when to touch wine was a sin. And now there are wine shops in village after village, lane after lane. And what are we doing with our hard-earned

money—draining it in the wine shops and smoking it away in drugs.”

The crowd: “We’ll thrash the smokers and drunkards black and blue!”

The Choudhuri: “Our fathers and grandfathers—what do you think they wore? *Genjis* and vests of the coarsest cloth—that’s what they wore. And we—we’ll give our lives for fancy clothes. And the result is, they bleed us white, these foreigners, they plunder the wealth of our land, and our poor weavers are turned into paupers. What kind of dharma is this that takes away the food from the mouth of one’s own brother and graciously places it in front of a stranger?”

The crowd: “We don’t even get to see coarse cloth these days.”

The Choudhuri: “So spin it in your own homes and wear it. What’s wrong with home-spun cloth? But please, don’t go near the courts, give up drinking, teach your children the basics of dharma, and remain united. That’s all Swarajya is, nothing else. And if anyone tells you Swarajya means rivers of blood will flow in the country, he’s a fool—don’t you believe one word of what he says.”

The crowd listened, hypnotised. More and more people turned up every day. The Choudhuri was elevated into a personality deserving the highest reverence.

3

Meanwhile Bhagat-ji disanted on the virtues of loyalty to the status quo.

“Friends, the duty of a raja is to rule and the duty of his subjects is to obey. This is the meaning of patriotism. All our sacred texts point to one ideal—the primacy of loyalty. The king is the representative of God Himself; to challenge the king is to flout God’s will. Disloyalty is treachery deserving of hell.”

A voice from the crowd: “And what about the dharma of the raja? What about he doing his duty?”

Second voice: “The raja we have is a puppet. The real raja is the money-bags of England.”

Third voice: “The money-bags know their business, but they know nothing of how to rule.”

Bhagat: “They come and tell you, leave the courts and go to the village councils. Now what kind of advice is that? Don’t they know

that the *panchayats* are all inefficient, that they can't tell right from wrong, they can't tell milk from water. They'll go by looks not by facts. Those who have pull and pressure, will win; those who stand alone, will be crushed. The courts decide on pure legal grounds; small and big have an equal say, tiger and goat drink at the same ghat."

Second voice: "Court justice is fake justice, everyone knows that. The side with false evidence and crooked lawyers wins. Who cares for what's truth and what's lies? The only sure thing about courts is you'll get harassed."

Bhagat: "And then they tell you, 'Don't buy foreign.' They say that it's gross exploitation of the poor. It seems to me we should buy whatever in the bazar is cheap and good. What's foreign or Swadeshi got to do with it? Does money grow on trees? How can they even think of spending it on shabby and shoddy Indian goods?"

A voice in the crowd: "Well, at least the money stays in India, it doesn't fill the pockets of foreigners."

Second voice: "Are you telling us to sit and eat with outcastes if we don't have food at home?"

Bhagat: "They also tell you, 'Don't put your children in government schools.' I ask you, if they hadn't themselves studied in government schools, do you think they'd be holding the big jobs they hold now, do you think they'd be running the big factories they run now? How can you carry on in the world of today without a modern education? What's the old style of education going to teach you except how to huddle over horoscopes and parrot prayers at pujas? You think the business of administration can be run by pandits and astrologers?"

A voice from the crowd: "Who wants administration? We are happy with our farming and tilling. We are no one's slaves!"

Second voice: "I don't want any of your modern strutting educated peacocks. Give me a simpleton any time. What do you think the new education does for you? It's all suits and boots, hats and cats, sticks and pigs. . . . And what does all this fooling around with fashion do? It puts the wealth of our land in the hands of foreigners. It's a crime against the nation!"

Bhagat: "Liquor and hashish are the big draws these days. Addiction is bad, I'm not denying that. The government gets crores of rupees revenue from liquor shops every year. If you can stop people

from drinking by closing down all the wine shops, that's fine, I've nothing against it. But the trouble is, he won't go to the wine shop, but he'll get his liquor somehow or other, and at fancy prices too, and he'll be ready to go to jail for it, because he is addicted and there's no stopping him. So I ask you what is the point of stopping the government's revenue when you can't stop the drunk from drinking, when in fact you make him worse than he was? And don't all of you know not all addiction is bad? Look at me—I need a pinch of opium every day, or my joints start aching, and my breath gets wheezy, and I start shivering all over.”

A voice: “You mean liquor's like a tonic to you?”

The first voice: “All this revenue is the fruit of sin. It's wrong. How can people prosper when the Raj itself is sinful?”

The second voice: “First they supply us with liquor and get us addicted—and then they collect the cash. Which man has so much money that he can afford food and clothes as well as liquor? You starve your children, you steal, you gamble, you cheat—there's no choice. A wine shop's not a wine shop—it's a symbol of our slavery.”

4

The villagers literally flocked to hear the Choudhuri pontificate. At his meetings there was standing room only. His fame spread. He was a great one for the supremacy of the *panchayat* and the progress of the nation. And his listeners lapped up every syllable of his pronouncements. They praised his political acumen. He became increasingly conscious of his greatness and glory, he experienced a grandiose realisation of his selfhood, his brows puckered at the very mention of indiscipline and injustice. This was the taste of Swatantra, of national pride. Homegrown cotton, homespun thread, handloomed cloth, Indian-style meals, indigenous courts, no police harassment, no back-scratching of bureaucrats—all this made his life sweet and simple and serene. Many became teetotallers under his reformist influence, and a benign moral wave swept over the village.

Bhagat was less lucky. The people became uneasy day by day with whatever he had to say. The only ones who turned up at his meetings were village accountants, watchmen, school teachers, and their friends and acquaintances. Occasionally there would be a

sprinkling of high officials respectfully hovering around Bhagat. For a while this beguiled Bhagat; but how is it possible to wipe away years of national insult with a few seconds of personal mollification? In any case, he was branded a quisling, a boot-licking lizard, a stool pigeon of the secret police. . . .How Bhagat chafed at the bouquets that went to his rival and smarted under the brickbats that fell on his own head. This was the first time in his life that he faced public humiliation. A lifetime of whole-hearted service to the community, all his cherishing and protecting of the villagers—reduced to dust! He was so upset that he couldn't find a moment's peace. His great dilemma was: how was he going to recover his lost self-respect, how was he going to oust his rival, how undermine the Choudhuri's enormous arrogance?

He decided the only way to get anything done was to beard the lion in his own den.

5

One evening, a big crowd assembled in front of the Choudhuri's house. A crowd of thousands, including many villagers from the neighbouring areas. The Choudhuri was spouting forth as usual on the virtues of Swarajya. Paeans to Mother India soared repeatedly to the sky: "*Bharat Mata ki jai!*" A cluster of women could be seen on one side. His peroration over, the Choudhuri sat down. While the volunteers were scurrying about collecting donations to the Swarajya Fund, Bhagat dashed in as if out of the blue and began loudly addressing the assembly:

"Brothers, don't be surprised to see me here. I'm not an enemy of Swarajya. Is there a man so low, so mean, that he'll oppose Swarajya? All I want to say is this—You cannot get Swarajya if you follow what the Choudhuri says. So don't get all wild and whirly about him. How are *panchayats* going to help if you don't get rid of the bitterness and hatred you feel for each other? How are you going to give up drinking if you can't get sensual pleasure out of your mind? Closing down wine shops is not the solution. How are we going to give up foreign cigarettes, soaps, socks, vests and fine muslin? How will you stop going to government schools if all you want from life is authority and snobbery? How will you ever be free of the chains of an education that goes against the very grain of our dharma? There is only one way of attaining Swarajya,

and that is self-control. This is the panacea, this is the answer to all our problems. Strengthen your soul, curb your senses, get a grip on your mind—then only will love for the motherland grow, then only will bitterness vanish, then only will jealousy and hatred get crushed, then only will you give up this senseless pursuit of physical indulgence, then only will the intoxication of wine lose its fatal fascination. Without soul-strength you will never get Swarajya. Self-interest is the root of all sin. That's what takes you to the courts, that's what makes you run after irreligious education. Strangle this monster of self-interest with the strength of your soul, and all your ideals will be in your grasp. All of you know I've been addicted to opium for forty years. From today I vow to look on opium as the sacred blood of a cow. I renounce it once and for all! For three generations we've had this feud with the Choudhuri's family. From today I vow the Choudhuri is my brother. If from today you see me or any of my family wearing anything but the coarsest cotton, then I beg of you, punish me, punish me any way you like. That's all I have to say today. May God go with us all!"

Bhagat started moving away in the direction of his house. The Choudhuri ran after him and embraced him warmly. That instant saw the end of a feud of three generations.

From that day on the Choudhuri and Bhagat espoused the common cause of Swarajya. They became close friends, so much so that it was hard to tell which of the two was more admired by the common people.

When you come to think of it, it was their competition, after all, which sparked off the change, and lit the flame of amity in the clay lamp hearts of both.

# *The Brainwave*

## 1

Seth Chandumal surveyed the stock in his shop and godown, and his heart sank. How was he ever going to sell it all off? The bank interest was piling up, so was the rent of the shop, and salary payments to employees were in arrears. He'd have to dig into his savings in order to save his face. A few more days of this, and he'd really be in trouble. As it was, his creditors had begun dunning.

Seth Chandumal's main shop was located in Chandni Chowk in the heart of Delhi, with branches in the mofussil. When the Congress Committee called for a total boycott of buying and selling of foreign cloth, he refused to take the directive seriously. He and his branch managers openly refused to put their signatures to the boycott pledge. And Chandumal suddenly found greatness thrust upon him—a greatness he never once dreamt of. He was, after all, a well-wisher of the Raj. It was customary of him to send basket offerings of fruits and vegetables to ingratiate the great and glorious white sahibs. He was thick and thin with the police, and he occupied an important seat in the municipality. By opposing the Boycott British policy of the Congress he got himself catapulted into the chief treasurership of the Law and Order Council. This was only one of the fringe benefits of toeing the British line. To welcome the Prince of Wales the government sanctioned twenty-five thousand rupees to buy textiles—which Seth Chandumal, naturally, supplied. He was a powerful man; what did he have to fear from the Congress? What was the Congress anyway? And police instigations gave additional boost to his ego: "On no account must you sign the pledge. We'll see what they can do. We'll send every single swine to jail."



Lalaji was hugely encouraged. He would show the Congress! The first fruit of this decision was that for a period of three months he had picketers in front of his house from crack of dawn till dot of nine at night. The police did their job well—they abused the picketing volunteers, roughed them up too sometimes for good measure, and the Sethji did his bit by showering arrowy advice right and left; but there was no getting rid of them. Quite the contrary, in fact; the excesses only made matters worse. His profits plummeted. From the mofussil came dismal reports from his managers and agents. A hideous headache! With no cure in sight. It didn't help matters to discover that many of his business rivals who had signed the boycott pledge were niftily making money selling foreign cloth under the counter. No picketers in front of *their* shops! *He* had to be the unlucky one.

He thought: *Rubbing shoulders with the police and the bureaucrats is no help. The picketers stay put. The constables serve only to scare away customers. The only way to survive is to get the picketers away, somehow or other.*

His accountant came up to him and said, "Lala-ji, see what's going on! There were these customers coming to our shop and the pickets got wind of them and intercepted them; God knows what mantra they chanted in front of them, but they've all gone back."

Chandumal: "Nothing will please me more than someone shooting these swines dead. They are going to ruin me, that's what."

Accountant: "There's no way out now, we have to swallow the insults. You should have signed the pledge if you didn't want the pickets. That way we could have sold off our goods one way or other."

Chandumal: "You take the words out of my mouth. But think of the shame if I did sign. All that tough front I put up! I would lose face in front of all the big officials if I sign now. What would they say?—Big brave baby daring the Congress! Serve him right! He's come to his senses now. It's not possible—how can I face the people whom I harassed and got thrashed, whom I abused and mocked? But I have a brainwave. A little trick. I hope it works. If it does, I'll be back in form. The trick's to kill the snake without nicking the stick. Get the pickets out, without asking any favours from anyone."

Nine in the morning, Seth Chandumal returned home after his holy dip in the Ganga and, relaxing against a bolster, began leafing through his mail. The letters were full of complaints and grievances from the managers of his branch shops. With each letter his blood pressure mounted. Meanwhile two flag-waving volunteers turned up and stationed themselves in front of his house.

"Get out!" the Seth-ji barked at them.

"Maharaj," retorted one volunteer, "we're on the road. It's a public road."

Seth-ji: "I don't like the looks of you."

Volunteer: "Tell it to the Congress Committee. Our orders are clear—we stay here until told otherwise."

A constable asked, "What's wrong, Seth-ji, what's this loafer up to?"

Chandumal replied, "I've told them to clear off and they say they won't budge. What impudence!"

Constable (to the volunteers): "Are you two moving or you want me to show you."

Volunteer: "The road doesn't belong to him."

The constable was bent on busily making a show of doing his duty. Coupled with this was his eagerness to curry favour with the Seth-ji. He spoke harshly to the volunteers; and when they appeared singularly unaffected, he shoved one of them so hard that the poor man fell face on the ground. A knot of volunteers collected; some sepoy also turned up. A sight hugely amusing to the scattered bystanders. Soon there was a crowd of spectators as well. Someone shouted, "*Mahatma Gandhi ki jail!*" Other voices joined in, and in no time at all a seething throng of people jammed the road.

"What's the matter, Lala Chandumal?" one of the bystanders asked. "What's the big idea? Why are you harassing these innocent people in front of your house? You should be ashamed of yourself. Don't you fear God at all?"

"I swear to you," replied Seth-ji, "I never said a word to any of the sepoys. I don't know why they are after the volunteers. And my name's getting blackened for no fault of mine."

A sepoy: "Lala-ji, didn't you tell us these two volunteers were threatening your customers? And now you're wriggling out of it!"

Chandumal: "It's a lie, it's a barefaced lie, it's a hundred per cent

lie. You with all your zealous sense of duty—you are the ones responsible. These poor volunteers were nowhere near the shop. I didn't see them threatening anyone. You were the ones who began pushing them around. What do you think I am? Why should I antagonise people? All I want to do is sell my goods. I don't want to make enemies."

Another sepoy: "You're a shrewd one, Lala-ji. You incite us to light the fire and then you back out. If you hadn't urged us, what reason had we to go about messing with these people? We had orders from the Sergeant too to keep a special watch on Seth Chandumal's shop and not allow any volunteer anywhere near it. That's what made us do what we did. If you, Seth-ji, hadn't put in a word to the Sergeant, why would he give us special orders?"

Chandumal: "What business have I saying anything to the Sergeant? He has his duty chalked out for him. These days everyone is against the Congress. Say the word 'Congress' to a policeman and he sees red. You don't have to wait for me to lodge a complaint before you take action."

In the meantime someone had gone and reported to the thana that a pitched battle was raging between the volunteers and constables in front of Chandumal's shop. The same report reached the Congress office as well. In no time an armed contingent of police turned up, led by an Inspector. The Congress workers too had assembled in sizeable numbers. It was quite an impressive crowd altogether. Repeated shouts of challenge and victory. Hurried consultations between Congress and police leaders. Result: the police took two volunteers into custody and marched them off to the thana.

After the police officers had left, Seth-ji turned to the Congress chief and said, "Today's been a revelation. What atrocities the police wreak on these poor volunteers!"

The chief: "Well, if *you* say so, it's a relief. At least the arrest of these two volunteers has not been entirely fruitless. You realise that at least now? You realise how fierce and vicious we are, what horrendous violators of law and order?"

Chandumal: "Yes, I see it all now."

The chief: "You are prepared to testify to this?"

Chandumal: "If it comes to that, I will. I'll face the music, whatever happens. It's intolerable, this police brutality. I had no idea."

The Congress secretary: "The police won't like it. You know

what they can do to you."

Chandumal: "Let them do their worst. I'm going to tell it straight. No lying this time. No more toeing the government line anymore."

The secretary: "Sir, what can I say? Our self-respect is in your hands."

Chandumal: "Put your trust in me. I'm not the type who betrays his motherland."

As the chief, secretary and the other office-bearers walked away, the secretary was heard saying, "Sounds honest to me."

The chief (doubtfully): "We'll know by tomorrow. Let's wait."

3

The Inspector of Police summoned Lala Chandumal to the thana in the evening and said, "We need your testimony. I hope we can rely on you?"

Chandumal said, "I'm ready."

Inspector of Police: "Did the volunteers insult the constables?"

Chandumal: "If they did, I didn't hear it."

Inspector of Police: "We are not debating whether you heard or did not hear. All you have to say is that they pushed the customers away, they threatened violence and resorted to force. That's all. Inspector, where's the document I've prepared for Seth-ji to sign?"

Chandumal: "I can't lie in open court. There'll be thousands there who know me. I can't hide my face from all of them. I have to live somewhere, don't I?"

Inspector of Police: "That's your personal affair. We are not concerned. There's no such thing as truth and lies and shame and scruples in political matters."

Chandumal: "My character will be stained."

Inspector of Police: "Forget it. You'll rise four-fold in our eyes."

Chandumal (thoughtfully): "No, sir, it's not possible. I refuse to testify. Find some other witness."

Inspector of Police: "You know the consequences? You won't have a shred of prestige left."

Chandumal: "I won't lie."

Inspector: "You'll be dismissed as treasurer of the Law and Order Council."

Chandumal: "As if that brings me any money!"

Inspector of Police: "Your gun license will be confiscated."

Chandumal: "Confiscate it. As if I care."

Inspector of Police: "We'll re-open your Income-tax files."

Chandumal: "You do that. I was hoping you would."

Inspector of Police: "You won't have a chair left to sit on."

Chandumal: "What'll I do with a chair? Everything else has gone, so take that too."

Inspector of Police: "If that's the way you want it, fine. You can leave. We'll get you yet."

4

The next day, about the same time, discussions were going on in the Congress office regarding the *modus operandi* of the following day's picketing.

The chief said, "We need two volunteers to picket Seth Chandumal's shop."

The secretary: "If I may venture an opinion, sir, there is no need to picket that shop."

The chief: "Why? Has he signed the boycott pledge?"

The secretary: "No, sir. But he is one of us now. He refused to testify for the police. You can imagine, sir, what pressures they must have brought to bear on him. Such unrelenting courage is not possible without a change of heart."

The chief: "You have a point there. There's certainly been a change."

The secretary: "Change, sir? It's been a revolution, nothing less. You know very well, sir, in a matter like this it shouldn't upset us if he ignores the boycott pledge drafted by our office-bearers. It's outright revolt, that's what it is. For Seth-ji to do this much is the equal of renouncing the world by a man who's determined on being holy. Do you know all the officials of the district are after his blood? I won't be surprised if they haven't kept His Excellency the Governor informed on all the details."

The chief: "What I say is that he should sign the boycott pledge if only for form's sake. Get him to come here. We have to see that everything is done right."

The secretary: "He's an arrogant man, he won't agree. What I'm afraid is that if we become over-fussy about rules and regulations, he'll have second thoughts. He might even decide to go over to the

other side again."

The chief: "Very well. If you have that much faith in him then let's leave his shop out. But let me add that you'll have to keep an eye on him even if you do it on the excuse that you have to meet him personally."

The secretary: "You are being unreasonably suspicious."

When Seth Chandumal entered his shop punctually at nine in the morning, there wasn't a single volunteer in sight. A faint smile flit across his lips.

He said to his accountant, "It worked."

The accountant: "So it seems. Not one patriotic gentleman in front of the shop!"

Chandumal: "Not now, not ever. We hold the trump card. What a lovely game—all parties routed."

The accountant: "Except the Congress, sir. They're a hard nut to crack."

Chandumal: "The things you say! It won't take long to win them over. If you like, I'll call them now, and they'll come running. The fact is, they are no one's friends and no one's enemies. They are after money, that's all. Slaves of the silver rupee. . . . But tell me, it was a neat trick, wasn't it?"

The accountant: "Sir, I could kiss your hands, you are so clever. Snake killed and stick unscathed—oh, it was good! But won't the Congress-wallas smell mischief?"

Chandumal: "Let them. I know how to deal with them. I'm always one step ahead—they branch along, I leaf away. Get the bale of English textiles out and see that it's distributed to our agents. One week, and we'll be back in roaring business."

# *The Ruse*

## 1

Pandit Balakram Shastri's lawfully wedded wife Maya had one irrepressible desire, and that was to possess a necklace. She had made this obvious to Pandit-ji hundreds of times, but her good husband dillied and dallied. He never said the truth out—namely that he didn't have the money—that was humiliating to his prestigious ego—he sweet-talked and wriggled his way out. What good were ornaments anyway ? Pure metals were unavailable these days. The jewellers chiselled eight annas out of every rupee you gave them. And, of course, jewels were a standing invitation to thieves. Only fools opened themselves up to such troubles for the sake of a temporary metallurgical prettification. Poor Maya hadn't the faintest acquaintance with the dialectics of debate and her husband's flourishes left her stupefied and submissive. She would see her neighbours in all their finery and her heart would miss a beat, but who was there to confide in ? If Pandit-ji had been a little more diligent and assiduous, there would have been no problem at all. But he was an easygoing man whose foci in life were pleasuring and leisuring—that is, food and rest. As for his wife's nagging—he didn't mind putting up with it so long as he wasn't denied his quota of refreshing slumber.

One day Pandit-ji on his return from school, noticed a gold necklace glittering on Maya. The lustre of the metal accentuated the radiance of her face. He had never seen her so breathtakingly beautiful before.

"Whose necklace is this?" he asked.

"I went over to the neighbour's house," Maya replied. "The lady next door had this necklace. I liked it. I borrowed it for today to

show it to you. Please get me one like it."

Pandit-ji: "Now that is wrong of you, to wear another's necklace. Just think, suppose it gets stolen; then I'll have to replace it; and think of the shame!"

Maya: "This is just the design I want. It's only twenty tolas."

Pandit-ji: "You *are* stubborn!"

Maya: "All my friends wear it, why shouldn't I?"

Pandit-ji: "If everyone else is jumping in the well, will you go and jump in too? Be sensible. It's going to cost no less than six hundred rupees to get a necklace like this. The interest alone on six hundred rupees at one per cent for five years will increase your capital into one thousand rupees. But in five years' time your gold necklace will be worth only three hundred rupees. What's the fun in wearing such a ridiculous necklace? Return the necklace, have your food, and go to sleep."

Saying which, he stalked out of the room.

Late that night he heard Maya screaming, "Thief! Hail! He's dragging me away."

Pandit-ji woke with a start and shouted, "Where? Where? Run! Run!"

Maya: "I saw him in the store-room. I saw his shadow."

Pandit-ji: "Get the lantern! Get my stick."

Maya: "I'm so frightened, I can't get up."

Some men from outside shouted, "What's happened. Pandit-ji? Burglars?"

Maya: "He came from the roof. I woke up and I saw someone standing over me. Hai Ram! My necklace is gone! I was wearing it. He tore it from my neck. Hai Bhagvan!"

Pandit-ji: "Why do you have to wear a necklace in bed?"

Maya: "How was I to know he was going to steal the necklace tonight? Hai Bhagvan!"

Pandit-ji: "What's the use hai-hai-ing now? Go weep over your karma! How many times have I told you life's chancy these days, you can't take risks. . . . Now you realise the truth of my words? Is anything else missing?"

The neighbours turned up with the lanterns and searched every nook and corner.

They poked at the rafters, they climbed to the roof, they searched high and low, peering even in the bathroom—no sign of the thief.

One of the neighbours: "It's an inside job."



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Another neighbour: "Looks like it. That's how all burglaries take place. What else has he run away with?"

Maya: "Nothing else. The utensils are all here. The locks are still on the trunks. If the wretch had to take something, why didn't he take *my* things? Why take the necklace of another? Oh God, how will I ever face her now?"

Pandit-ji: "Go and borrow more necklaces, and have more fun! I told you so!"

Maya: "Hai Bhagvan, it was my fate to be disgraced!"

Pandit-ji: "I tried and tried, and I failed. She wouldn't listen, she just wouldn't listen. And now there's six hundred rupees gone down the drain. Let's see what God does to save your face now."

Maya: "If the wretch had stripped every inch of my house clean, I wouldn't have felt so bad. Poor woman, she had the necklace made just a few days ago."

Pandit-ji: "Are you sure it was twenty tolas?"

Maya: "She said it was twenty tolas."

Pandit-ji: "We are finished, that's all."

Maya: "I'll tell her we had a theft in the house. She's not going to eat me up. Does she expect us to go and steal a necklace for her?"

Pandit-ji: "She trusted you with it, you lost it, you've got to replace it. How does it concern her whether a thief stole it or you pocketed it? She'll never trust you again."

Maya: "Where will I get all that money?"

Pandit-ji: "I don't know where, but it will have to come from somewhere, or both of us will lose face. What a stupid mistake!"

Maya: "Just my fate, I never got a chance to wear it even for a day. I'm useless, I'm doomed, I'm no good, I'm denied even the littlest pleasures. I'm the most unfortunate of creatures."

Pandit-ji: "Shut up and sit down! How is weeping and lamenting going to help you now? Tell your friend not to worry, that we'll do our best to return it as soon as we can in whatever way we can."

Pandit Balakram's chief worry from now on was how to get the necklace replaced. It was easy enough to do so, except that he did not relish the prospect of bankruptcy. If he did declare himself bankrupt, she would have to swallow it, for she would never have

the courage to chastise a Brahmin; but Pandit-ji was not one to compromise the glory of his Brahminhood so conveniently. He shook off his indolent habits and plunged neck-deep in the acquisition of wealth.

For six months he worked non-stop, night and day. No more siestas. Late hours at night. Previously he used to teach in a school and considered all other vocations unfit for a Brahmin, quite *infra dig*. But now after returning from the village school he held religious discourses in the evening on the legends of the *Bhagavata* and busied himself till late midnight in preparation of horoscopes and detailed yearly predictions. Early in the mornings he did readings in the temple from the Goddess Durga legends. Seeing him work twentyfour hours a day, Maya regretted being the root cause of his incessant labours. She feared he would fall ill—that would be terrible indeed. Day by day he was getting emaciated, and her anxiety grew correspondingly. Five months passed.

One evening she was about to start her prayers at lighting-up time when Pandit-ji turned up, and flung a wrapped-up packet in front of her, saying, "There! I'm free of your debt."

She opened the packet; there was a gold necklace in it, of intricate workmanship, beautifully glittering. Pure joy suffused her face. She looked timidly at her husband and asked, "Are you happy giving this or does it upset you?"

Pandit-ji: "How does that concern you? The debt's got to be paid, happily or otherwise."

Maya: "What debt?"

Pandit-ji: "What do you mean, what debt? All right, call it a replacement."

Maya: "It's not a replacement."

Pandit-ji: "What else is it?"

Maya: "It's a . . . gift from you . . . to me."

Pandit-ji: "What's this? You mean I have to get another necklace to replace the lost one?"

Maya: "No, I don't mean that. The necklace wasn't stolen. I cooked the whole story up."

Pandit-ji: "You did?"

Maya: "I did."

Pandit-ji: "Touch me, and swear it."

Maya: "I touch your feet and swear it."

Pandit-ji: "So you were pulling a fast one on me."

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**Maya: "Yes."**

**Pandit-ji: "Have you any idea what your joke has cost me?"**

**Maya: "Over six hundred rupees?"**

**Pandit-ji: "Much more. The price I paid for it was a heavy price indeed—it cost me my freedom, that's what it did."**

# *The Chess Players*

## 1

Wajid Ali Shah is on the throne. His capital, Lucknow, a cauldron of pleasures. Big and small, rich and poor wallow in that cauldron. Soirées of song and dance, opiate hubble-bubble parties. . . . Idleness, irresponsibility, indulgence everywhere—in administration, literature, social mores, artistic activities, economic endeavour, in even the mundane intercourse of daily life. Courtiers and palace officers languish in sensual visions, poets sing of love and the anguish of the beloved's absence, embroiderers create wonders with gold thread and with cotton arabesques on fine muslin, and traders do roaring business in kohl, attar, tooth tinctures, and special bodypastes for the massage of ladies.

They go about, eyes glazed with sense-intoxication. They know nothing of what's going on in the outside world. Theirs is a closed whirl of cock-fights and partridge-fights, an endless merry-go-round of merrymaking. Here's a dice game in progress; here's an exultant scream of victory. Over there is a vicious battle of chess. Raja as well as beggar participate, fascinated. It's come to such a pass that you give a few coppers to a fakir, and he doesn't go and buy bread with them, he prefers a few puffs of opium or a swig of country liquor instead. Chess, gambling and the ninety-six-pack card game called *ganjifa* make the mind nimble, they sharpen the powers of discrimination, they facilitate the resolution of complex dilemmas. At least that's what they all passionately claim. (There are still many people around nowadays who would endorse that claim.) The point being that if Mirza Sajjad Ali and Mir Roshan Ali decide to employ the better part of their copious leisure to the sharpening of their intellect, why should any straight-thinking mortal

find that objectionable? Both have hereditary *jagirs*; certainly they are free of the problem of earning a livelihood; they can well afford to while away their time sitting at home busy doing nothing. Come to think of it, what else is there to do?

Early morning it begins. The two cronies finish breakfast, spread open the chessboard, arrange the chessmen, and the war manoeuvres start. And that's it—time stops—no noon, no afternoon, no evening. Summons after summons from inside the house—"Your meal's ready." To which they reply, "All right, coming, spread the tablecloth." And, of course, it always ends up with the cook depositing the food in the room, and the two friends simultaneously messing and chassing.

There is no elder in Mirza Sajjad Ali's house so the chess games are played in the hall of audience itself. This doesn't mean of course that his family approves. Not just the family—the local residents, the servants and retainers have only one thing to say about the game—that it's nasty, that it's abominable, that it'll ruin the house, Allah knows it's an obsession that destroys a man, making him fit for nothing, a wreck in home and out, it's a wasting disease. Mirza's wife, the Begum Sahiba, loathes it with a hatred so intense that she seizes every opportunity to taunt her husband on his addiction. Not that she gets the opportunity easily. She's still sleeping when the game begins every morning; only after she goes to bed late at night is her husband ever back home. And so she lets loose her frustrations on the servants: "Did he ask for *pan*? Tell him he can come and get it himself! He doesn't have time to eat, does he? Take this food and dump it on his head—let him eat it if he wants to or give it to the dogs if he wants to?" But she hasn't the courage to say all this to his face. Actually she isn't as infuriated with her husband as she is with Mir Sahib. She's nicknamed him "Mir the Unmaker." And Mirza-ji naturally finds it convenient to give himself a clean bill and foist all the blame on Mir Sahib.

One day Begum Sahiba is down with a headache. She tells her maid, "Call Mirza Sahib here. I need medicine. Run!"

Mirza-ji tells the maid, "You go, I'm coming."

The Begum Sahiba is in no mood to take this lightly. *What impudence—I have a headache, and he plays chess!*

Her face flushes with anger. She orders the maid, "You go this very instant and tell him to come immediately or I will leave the

house and go get the medicine myself."

Mirza-ji is absorbed in the game and anticipates checkmating his opponent in two quick moves. Visibly upset, he says, "How dare she! Tell her to wait."

Mir Sahib: "*Arré*, go and do what she says. Women are fragile creatures. Very temperamental."

Mirza-ji: "Yes, yes, of course; wouldn't you like to see me go! Two moves and you're finished."

Mir Sahib: "Not that easy, noble sir. I have a move up my sleeve to block you nicely. Come on, go and attend to her. Why needlessly irritate her?"

Mirza-ji: "Very well, let's settle this and then I go."

Mir Sahib: "No, enough. First things first."

Mirza-ji: "*Arré yaar*, she'll make me run to the hakim, that's all. There's no headache: that's just her way of bothering me."

Mir Sahib: "All right, all right, but you can't leave her alone. . . ."

Mirza-ji: "I know, but let me play this one move first."

Mir Sahib: "You'll do nothing of the sort. Until you attend to her first, I won't move a single piece on the board."

A reluctant Mirza Sahib goes inside and finds his wife's forehead wrinkle-free; her mood is changed and he hears her whining, "Chess, chess, chess, that's all you love. What do you care if anyone lives or dies? I've never seen a man like you!"

Mirza-ji: "Why pick on me? It's Mir Sahib, he won't let me get up. You don't know how difficult it's been for me to get even this little break."

Begum: "Does he think everyone as lazy and good-for-nothing as he is? Has he no children of his own or has he got rid of them all?"

Mirza-ji: "He's a clinging creeper, that man. He comes in and he stays put, and he won't go until I play with him."

Begum: "Why don't you tell him straight to his face that he's not wanted, and be done with it."

Mirza-ji: "How can I do that? He's one of our set, isn't he? He's older, in fact—and full two fingers taller than me. The least I can do is be considerate."

Begum: "In that case, let me handle him. If he doesn't like it, he can lump it. As if we depend on him! When I need my husband, I'll have my husband. Hiriya, bring the chessboard inside. And tell Mir Sahib my husband won't play anymore, so could he please be

so kind as to take his leave."

Mirza-ji: "Oh wonderful, wonderful, go ahead—you've found the best way to make us look thoroughly contemptible. Wait, Hiriya, where do you think you're going?"

Begum: "Let her go! You stop her, you stop *me*. All right, stop her—but try stopping me. Just try."

Begum Sahiba rises in a huff and marches towards the hall of audience. Mirza-ji pales in fear and begins imploring his wife, "For God's sake, I beg of you by the holy name of Hazrat Hussain, don't! You insult me if you go there."

Unheeding, the Begum reaches the door of the hall of audience. But her courage wanes and her knees tremble at the thought of facing an other-than-husband male. She side-glances in; it so happens that the hall is empty. Mir Sahib has conveniently re-positioned a couple of chessmen for his benefit and is lounging outside the hall. The next thing, she strides in and overturns the chessboard; some pieces roll under the elegant seat, some scatter outside the room; she closes the doors from inside and bolts them with an iron chain. Mir Sahib from outside hears the clatter of the chess pieces and the jingle of the bangles and the noise of the doors closing. And then it dawns upon him—the Begum Sahiba's in one of her moods. And, quietly, he slinks away towards home.

Mirza-ji says, "You're a wonder."

Begum: "If Mir Sahib turns up here again, I'm warning you I'll shut the doors on him. If you had the same love for God that you have for chess, wouldn't our home be a happier one! You have a fine time chessing around while I slave and slog in the kitchen. Tell me, are you going to the hakim's or no?"

Mirza-ji leaves home but, instead of making his way to the hakim's, he lands up at Mir Sahib's residence and regales his friend with a painstaking account of his wife's antics.

Mir Sahib says, "The minute I saw the chessmen flung out the door, I made my exit. And fast. She has a real temper, hasn't she? But the way you pamper and please her, it's not natural. What business is it of hers what you do or don't do outside the house? Let her run the home—that's what a wife is good for—why does she poke her nose in other things?"

Mirza-ji: "Let's forget all that. Tell me, where do we have our next round?"

Mir Sahib: "That's no problem. I have this huge house. Why not

right here?"

Mirza-ji: "But what do I do with Begum Sahiba? If playing at my place got her so upset, playing at yours—why, she'll kill me!"

Mir Sahib: "Let her rant and rave. She'll cool down in a couple of days; they all do. But take my advice and show her you are a man—throw your weight around a little."

2

For some unknown reason Mir Sahib's wife prefers her husband to be as far away from home as possible. So she never nags her husband on his inordinate love of chess; in fact, she sometimes pointedly reminds him that he is getting late for his chess sessions. Which leaves Mir Sahib with the impression that his wife is an extremely polite lady; and insightful too. But the change of plans, with Mir Sahib sprawling at chess all day long at home, acutely distresses her. It restricts her freedom: it prevents her from longingly lingering at the window.

Meanwhile the servants start gossiping. All they did in the past was swat flies, oblivious of who came and who went in the house. Now they have to be on the alert all twentyfour hours. "Fetch pan!" "Get the sweets!" And the hookah is permanently boiling and bubbling, like the heart of an ardent lover. They complain repeatedly to Begum Sahiba, "Huzoor, the master's chess-playing gets on our nerves. Our feet have blisters running around doing his errands. What kind of chess is this that goes on from dawn to midnight! A game or two is all right to while away time. . . . We are not complaining. We are his servants, we will obey orders. But his chess-playing—it's too much. No chess player ever prospers: some ruin or other will always visit his house. It will visit the whole community. His chess-mania is the talk of the community—no one likes it. We are loyal to our master and we resent all this ugly talk about him. But what can we do, we are helpless."

To which Begum Sahiba replies, "You know I don't like it myself. But nothing can be done. He's so stubborn! He listens to nobody."

A few of the locality's residents with old-world views begin prognosticating dire inauspicious happenings: "There's no hope left. If our rich folk behave like this, then God help the country. Chess will be the doom of this kingdom. Bad signs, bad signs."



The kingdom's in utter chaos. The subjects are looted and fleeced day and night, right and left. There's no one to listen to their grievances. The wealth of the countryside is sucked into Lucknow where it gets dissipated on prostitutes, clowns and multi-sensual lascivity. Debts to the British company keep mounting. A creeping uglification starts taking over. The annual taxes can't be collected because the economy is going to the dogs. The Resident issues repeated warnings, but in the welter of ubiquitous dissolution there's no one to listen to them. Or if anyone listens, they have no effect.

Despite all this, the chess orgy continues in the hall of audience. Many months pass. New strategies are devised; new forts are established; new battle formations visualised; tempers get frayed, to the extent of furious you-you-ing and me-me-ing; after which the friends quickly make up. There are occasions when they actually stop playing; and Mirza-ji, all worked up, goes home, and Mir Sahib does the same. Next morning the two friends are back in the hall of audience.

One day the two are ecstatically immersed in the game when a royal cavalry officer rides up to the house and inquires for Mir Sahib. A worried Mir Sahib wonders what this might mean. Why this summons? He instructs the servants, "Say I'm out."

The officer: "Out where?"

Servant: "We don't know. Why do you want him?"

The officer: "What do you mean why I want him? Who are you to ask? He has been summoned by the Nawab. Perhaps he has to supply some soldiers. He holds a *jagir*, doesn't he? What does he think it is, a joke? He'll come to his senses when he has to go and fight on the battlefield."

Servant: "We'll inform him, sir."

The officer: "You'll inform him nothing. I'll come here tomorrow. My orders are to accompany him."

The officer leaves. Mir Sahib is all nerves. He tells Mirza-ji, "What now, my friend?"

Mirza-ji: "What a fix! Suppose they come after me. . . ."

Mir Sahib: "The swine said he'll turn up here tomorrow."

Mirza-ji: "It's hell, I tell you. And if he wants us to fight on the field, then we've had it."

Mir Sahib: "I have it the best way is not to be at home. From tomorrow let's find a lonely spot on the other side of the Gomti.

They'll never find us there. His lordship is welcome to come and find no one at home."

Mirza-ji: "Splendid! You're a genius. There's no way out but this."

Meanwhile Mir Sahib's wife is telling the cavalry officer, "You did a good job."

"I twirl these fools around my fingers," he replies. "All their brain and all their brawn is soused in their chess game. Catch them staying at home now."

3

From the next day the two friends sneak out of home with their faces cloaked. Small carpet rolled and tucked under one arm, folded betel leaves neatly packed in a box, they retire to a dilapidated mosque, dating to the days of Nawab Asaf-ud-Dowla, on the other bank of the Gomti. En route they pick up tobacco, hand-held hubble-bubbles, and wine. Reaching the mosque, they spread the carpet, prepare the hookahs, and arrange the chessboard. Time and the world stand still. "Check" and "checkmate" are the only words that escape their lips. No yogi ever showed superior spiritual repose. At noon, feeling hungry, they go to a local bread-shop; after which, a full go at the hookah, and the chess-battle starts all over again. Sometimes, in the intensity of their absorption, they skip lunch altogether.

In the meanwhile, the country is collapsing. The soldiers of the East India Company march on Lucknow. Commotion and panic everywhere. The townsmen evacuate their wives and children to the countryside. But our two good friends, the chess players, remain blissfully unaffected. They come home by obscure lanes and bylanes. Their one fear is they'll be spotted and reported by an official retainer. They have no sense of responsibility at all to the *jagir* estates that bring them thousands of rupees every year.

One day the two friends are sitting as usual in the ruins of the mosque, lost in chess. Mirza-ji's side is weak and Mir Sahib keeps checkmating him. Suddenly a Company soldier shows up, one of the force that has been ordered to attack and occupy Lucknow.

Mir Sahib says, "It's the British soldiers. God help us!"

Mirza-ji: "Let them come. Check! Your move."

Mir Sahib: "Let's hide behind this ruin and have a look at

them."

Mirza-ji: "What's the hurry? Checkmate!"

Mir Sahib: "I see cannons! There must be at least five thousand soldiers coming. Young and strapping specimens. With pink baboon faces. Frightening faces."

Mirza-ji: "Come to the point, sir. Try your little tricks on others. Checkmate!"

Mir Sahib: "You're a character. The town's in danger, and all you can think of is checkmate. Has it ever occurred to you that if the town falls, we have nowhere to go?"

Mirza-ji: "We'll think of that later. In the meantime, listen to this—checkmate! This is your last chance."

The soldiers march away. It is ten in the morning. The chess game recommences.

Mirza-ji says, "How do we eat today?"

Mir Sahib: "Today's the Ramzan fast. You get extra hungry these days, or what?"

Mirza-ji: "No, it's not that. I wonder what's happening in the city."

Mir Sahib: "As if anything ever happens in the city! Eating and sleeping that's what's happening. And the Nawab's having his usual fun."

The friends begin another game of chess and, before they know it, it's three o'clock. This time it is Mirza-ji whose side is weak. The four o'clock chime sounds, and they hear the march of the returning soldiers. Nawab Wajid Ali is a prisoner and is being taken to an unknown destination. The town is quiet: no violence, not one drop of bloodshed, no panic. History has no record of such a peaceful overthrow of an independent kingdom. This is no instance of the spiritual ahimsa which delights even the gods. This is cowardice of the first water, the kind of lily-livered spinelessness that makes even the worst cowards weep. The Nawab of the glorious territory of Oudh is taken in captivity, and the citizens of his capital Lucknow sleep through it. What political downfall could be more complete, more shameful?

Mirza-ji says, "They've taken the Nawab Sahib prisoner."

Mir Sahib: "Have they? Checkmate again, my friend."

Mirza-ji: "Sir, one moment. . . . My heart's not in the game. The poor Nawab must be weeping tears of blood. . . ."

Mir Sahib: "Must be. . . . What else can a prisoner do? Check-

matel”

Mirza-ji: “Everyone has to face such ups-and-downs. . . .It’s tragic.”

Mir Sahib: “Yes, yes, yes, I know. Checkmate! You’ve had it, my friend.”

Mirza-ji: “My God, you *are* heartless! If such a calamity doesn’t move you, what will? Hai, poor Wajid Ali Shah!”

Mir Sahib: “First save *your* king, then think of the Nawab Shah. Checkmate! I win.”

The soldiers march by them, taking Wajid Ali Shah prisoner. The instant the last soldier files by, Mirza-ji rearranges the chessboard. Defeat is a hurting wound. Mir Sahib says, “Let’s chant a dirge in revered memory of the late lamented glory of the Nawab.” But Mirza-ji’s patriotism revolves around his defeat at chess. All he wants is to get his own back: he will be one up on Mir Sahib yet!

4

Evening. Bats squeak in the nooks and crannies of the ruined mosque. Swallows snuggle cosily in their nests. The two friends are still at their chess game hammer and tongs, like two bloodthirsty warriors. Mirza-ji has lost three consecutive games; and the fourth does not look very promising either. He makes up his mind to play cautiously in the hope of winning, but he invariably comes up with one false move or other which dashes his chances of victory. With each defeat his desire for revenge grows. And Mir Sahib, in the seventh heaven of happiness, snaps his fingers, sings snatches from ghazals, and chortles with delight as if he has stumbled on a trove of hidden treasure. Mirza-ji listens, and tries to cover up his feeling of shameful inadequacy by praising the ghazals. But as the game goes against him, he gets more and more impatient. The littlest thing gets on his nerves. “Sir, you can’t change your move. What kind of game is this—you make one move and then change to another! Make up your mind. Why are you holding the chessman if you don’t want to play him? Let him alone. Use your mind before you use your fingers. It takes you half an hour to make one simple move. It’s against the rules. If you take more than five minutes from now on, you forfeit the game. Let’s make that a rule. There! You’ve changed your move again! Be good and put the chessman back where he was.”

Mir Sahib's queen is in trouble. He says, "I never moved at all."

Mirza-ji: "Of course you did. I saw you. Put him back where he was."

Mir Sahib: "Why? I'm still holding him. I'll put him where I want."

Mirza-ji: "You can't hang on to him till doomsday. You have to move one way or other. Your queen's in trouble, so you've decided to do a bit of cheating, have you?"

Mir Sahib: "You're the cheat, not me. Win or lose is in the hands of fate. Cheating won't help you."

Mirza-ji: "So, you admit you've lost?"

Mir Sahib: "Me lose? Are you out of your head?"

Mirza-ji: "Just be so good as to put the chessman where he was, will you, please?"

Mir Sahib: "I won't. Why should I?"

Mirza-ji: "You won't? You must!"

Tempers flare up further. Both stick to their guns. Neither budes an inch. Wild words are exchanged.

Mirza-ji says, "Only a gentleman knows how to play chess. You've cut grass all your life, what do you know about chess? Nobility's a different thing altogether. You don't become noble just by owning an estate."

Mir Sahib: "What! Your father cut grass, your ancestors all cut grass! We have been playing—let me remind you of this—chess for generations."

Mirza-ji: "Tell me another, my grass-cutting friend! All your life you've been a cook in the house of Gazi-uddin Hyder, and now you've suddenly put on the airs of a nobleman! You think nobility's had for the asking, do you?"

Mir Sahib: "Why are you insulting your own ancestors, my friend—they were the original cooks! We—we ate at the royal table the food that your ancestors cooked."

Mirza-ji: "*Arré*, you chaff-cutter, shut up!"

Mir Sahib: "You shut up! I'm warning you! I'll have you remember I'm not used to such language! If anyone so much as glares at me, I have his eyes plucked out. You want to dare me?"

Mirza-ji: "If that's the way you want it, that's the way you'll have it. If it's a duel you're after, let's have it—no holds barred."

Mir Sahib: "Don't bully me!"

They unsheathe their swords. It is the age of feudal regalia:

everyone sports a sword, a dagger, and a miscellany of other lethal weapons. They are hedonists but not pusillanimous. What they lack is patriotic fervour—they think twice before they fight for their king or for their country, but their code of personal honour is second to none. They take up fencing positions; swords flash in the sun; steel clangs on steel. Fatally wounded, both collapse. These are the same heroes who, living, never shed a tear over the tragic fall of their sovereign; they are now happily dead, defending the honour of their chess vizier.

The darkness deepens. The chessboard surveys the scene; the two chess kings, ensconced in their thrones, silently mourn the passing-away of these two flowers of Moghul chivalry.

Stillness everywhere. The mosque's crumbling vaults, disintegrating doors, and dust-suffocated minarets stare in blank bewilderment at the companionate corpses.

## *Babaji's Feast*

### 1

This sadhu he turns up at Ramdhan the cowherd's hut and says, "My son, I bless you, be gracious to this humble sadhu."

So Ramdhan goes to his wife and tells her, "There's this holy man at the door, see if you have something for him."

This wife of his is scrubbing the kitchen utensils, and she is worried because she doesn't know where the next meal is coming from. There's not a single grain of wheat in the house. It's the month of April, bright and sunny outside, but inside the hut it's poor and empty and dark even in the afternoon. The winter harvest is over and done—half of it is in the hands of the moneylender and the other half in the hands of the Zamindar's hirelings. Even the husk and straw have been sold off to escape the clutches of the cattle merchants; all that's left to their share is a few sheaves which, after much threshing and pounding, give them exactly one maund of grain, which sees them through the month of April. And what's going to happen now? How will the bullocks survive, how will *they* survive? God alone knows. And here comes this sadhu at their door. You can't turn him away unfed, what will he think?

And so the wife says, "What do I give, I have nothing."

And Ramdhan tells her, "Go have a look in the jar and see if there is any flour left."

And the wife replies, "You know I scraped the jar clean yesterday to make our last meal. How do you expect me to find something when nothing's there?"

And what does Ramdhan say? "I'm not going to tell the baba that we have nothing in the house. Borrow something from somewhere."

And the wife replies, "We still haven't returned what we borrowed earlier. How do you expect me to show my face to them?"

So Ramdhan tells her this time, "What about the food you set apart for the gods? Give him that."

But the wife insists, "And if I do that what about my puja? What do I offer the gods?"

But Ramdhan is firm. "The gods are not going to turn up personally at our door. Find some other way to appease them. And if you can't, don't worry, what does it matter?"

And his wife retorts, "*Arré*, what do you think—do we have five seers of god-food in our house? At most half a seer. What about the other sadhus who'll then keep turning up? You'll have to refuse them."

So Ramdhan tells her, "Don't you worry, we'll deal with that problem when it comes."

And his wife gets up in a huff, brings out a small earthen vessel containing just about half a seer of flour, especially kept apart as food for the gods. And Ramdhan keeps looking at it and thinking what's the right thing to do; then he scoops out a bowlful and goes out and pours it in the makeshift receptacle of the ascetic's loose garment.

2

The sadhu mahatma accepts the offering and says, "My son, I'll spend the day with you. Get me some *dal*, I'll cook myself a meal."

And so Ramdhan goes back in and informs his wife. Now it so happens that there is some *dal* in the house. First Ramdhan gets the *dal*, the salt, and some cowdung fuel cakes; and then he goes and draws water from the well. After which the sadhu with ritual religiosity goes about patting the wet flour into thin cakes and boiling the *dal*; in addition, with potatoes produced from his plentiful garment knot, he concocts a mashed preparation. And when all is ready he tells Ramdhan, "My son, I need a cowrie of ghee to sanctify this meal. The gods eat only sanctified food."

And Ramdhan says, "But, babaji, there is no ghee in the house."

And the sadhu replies, "Don't say such things, my son, God has blessed you with much."

Ramdhan says, "Maharaj, I have no cow, no buffalo, where will I get the ghee?"



Whereupon the sadhu comes out with, "God is good and God is great, my son. The divine larder is never out of stock. Ask the mistress of the house."

So Ramdhan hurries to his wife and tells her, "He wants ghee. He's a beggar, but he needs ghee to lubricate his insides."

And his wife says, "Take some *dal* over to the bania in exchange for some ghee. Now that you've done so much, do this bit too. Why displease him?"

The ghee arrives. The sadhu keeps aside a part of the meal as the *pindi* god-offering, after which he tinkles the holy bell, and falls to. The gusto with which he gobbles the meal! And then he makes circular motions with his left hand on his rotundity and snoozes off at the doorstep. Ramdhan removes the *thali*, the bowl, and the ladle for washing.

And no meal gets cooked in Ramdhan's hut that night. They boil a watery *dal* and drink it.

And all that Ramdhan can say to himself, before going off to sleep, is, "Well, he's a better man than I am."

# *The Song of the Heart*

## I

Midnight.

The bank of a river.

The stars transfixed in the sky, their reflections flickering in the waves' undulations.

The exquisite, life-giving, life-nourishing nuances of some celestial melody pervaded this still, sombre scene like hopes playing on the heart, like gentle grief shadowing a human face.

Rani Manorama had received initiation from her guru today. After a whole day of fasting and gift-giving, she lay lapped in sweet sleep.

Suddenly she opened her eyes; dulcet sounds filled her ears.

And she became restless like a winged insect hypnotised by the flame of a candle. She became impatient like an ant aroused by the scent of molasses.

She rose and slipped past the sentries and chowkidars of the palace as easily and naturally as tears slipping down when one hears wailful poignance wafting in the air.

Thorn bushes crowded the high river banks. Fierce animals, horrendous cries. Corpses—and more horrible than corpses, necrophagous thoughts.

Manorama was the epitome of delicacy and grace. That lovely music charmed her into a state of total ecstasy. Obstacles meant nothing to her.

She walked for hours till she reached the river bank.

Manorama looked helplessly on all sides. She saw a boat moored on the bank.

She approached and said, "Boatman, I want to cross over to the other side. This lovely raga haunts me."

Boatman: "I don't use the boat at night. It's a fierce wind tonight. Look at those huge waves. It's dangerous."

Manorama: "I'm Rani Manorama. Untie the boat. I'll give you whatever you want."

Boatman: "That makes it still more impossible. Ranis are not allowed to cross the river."

Manorama: "Sir, I fall at your feet. Untie it, quickly. My heart cries out to go there."

Boatman: "What's in it for me?"

Manorama: "Anything you want."

Boatman: "Anything you give. I'm an illiterate man, I don't know what to ask from Ranis. Suppose I ask for something that's not in your power to give?"

Manorama: "See this necklace—it's priceless. It's yours for ferrying me across."

She unclasped the necklace. It dazzled the hard, swarthy, wrinkled face of the boatman.

Suddenly it appeared to Manorama that the strains of the magical song came from somewhere nearby. Almost as if some man was sitting on the bank and pouring out his heart in the pure fullness of joy. Her heart overflowed in sympathetic happiness. *Ah, what a soul-enchanting raga.*

Impatiently she burst out, "Boatman, let's not delay—untie the boat. I can't wait any more."

Boatman: "What use is this necklace to me?"

Manorama: "It's real pearls."

Boatman: "That makes it worse. When my wife puts it on and shows it to her neighbours they'll burn with jealousy and call her names. They might think she stole it and what will it be then but a snake round her neck. My little hut won't be safe any more. They'll say I stole it and they'll want to steal it themselves. No, I don't want this necklace."

Manorama: "Ask anything else and I'll give it. I beg of you, don't delay any more. I've no more patience. I won't wait any more."

Each single sound of this raga is agonising."

Boatman: "Give me something better."

Manorama: "Heartless wretch! I know what you are doing—you are putting me off. What I'm giving, you don't take, and you won't even tell me what you want. What do you know about the condition I'm in? I'm prepared to sacrifice everything to get my heart's desire."

Boatman: "What will you give?"

Manorama: "I've nothing else so precious, but this I promise you—if you untie the boat you can have my palace which you must have seen sometime. It's made of pure white marble, the best in India. Don't delay any more—not one second."

Boatman (laughing): "What good is a palace to me? I'll only make enemies of my friends and relatives. In this boat I'm not afraid even of the darkest nights. The storm keeps howling but I'm safe in here. But even my day hours in that palace will become nightmares. My whole family could be housed happily in one corner of that palace. How will I fill all the other rooms? I have no servants—I have no helpers. Where will I get all the goods and luxuries to adorn all the palace rooms? Who'll clean and wash and manage and repair the palace? The fountains will all dry up. Jackals will roam and howl in the flower-beds, and pigeons and swallows will nest in the upper rooms."

But Manorama was hardly listening—she was in a trance—the strains of the song appeared to be so near, so near—so excruciatingly sweet and lovely—like the flaming wick of a clay lamp gushing into sudden new brightness. Mind-bewitchment had become soul-intoxication.

Manorama said irritably, "Oh, why don't you ask for something and be finished with it! Ah what a perfect raga of alienation, what agitating enchantment! I can't stand it any more! Like a river seeking the sea, like breath merging with breeze, like fragrance sweetening its precincts, I seek that divine melody. In it is the ecstasy of the *koel*, the yearning of the *papiha*, the longing of the *shyama*, the flowing of the fountain, the passion of the storm. It is the glow of conscience, the dwelling of the soul, the purest inner shrine. Even a second's delay now means death, O boatman. Untie the boat! Quick! I must go now to the source of this fragrance, to the quintessential flower, I must go to the root lamp of all this light—O take me there! I can't see it, but I know this song is near, so near."

Boatman: "I don't want your palace, my hut's far better."

Manorama: "What can I give you then? This is no song that I hear. This is the garden of eternal innocence, this is the fragrance of the flowers of the universe, the sweetest of all sweetnesses, the gist of life itself, the honey-heart of phenomena. Untie the boat! As long as I live, I will serve you, draw water for you, scrub and clean for you, sweep the road clean for you, fill the hut with flowers for you, and massage your wife's feet. Dearest boatman, had I a hundred lives I would offer them at the altar of this song. Oh for God's sake, don't disappoint me. My last drop of patience is drying up. Only my yearning keeps faintly flickering, my hopes are now all in your hands."

Manorama, bewildered and troubled, fell at the boatman's feet.

She had an eerie feeling the song was approaching her and hovering over her soul like transcendent radiance, like miraculous rain.

She horripilated.

She swayed back and forth in ecstasy.

She felt ethereal.

She sensed the scintillation of stars in the fetters of her flesh-frame.

She lost all sense of self, and that ecstatic song, that ineffable raga now came out of her mouth.

The same drops of nectar now issued from her lips.

She was now herself the riverine flow.

From her mouth now came the strains of the life-giving melody which earlier had wafted from across the other side.

Her face was the enchanted mandala of the moon itself.

In her eyes was love's perfect dream.

# *A Special Experience*

## 1

They gave him a year's hard labour for it. For such a trivial offence — three days ago, on a hot May afternoon, he'd gone and served sherbet and *pan* to the political agitators. I was in court at the time. Outside the courtroom, the political passion of the entire town's populace seemed to be lashing its tail and howling like a ferocious caged creature. They dragged him in handcuffed. Suddenly, pin-drop silence. But there was a maelstrom in my head, and I felt as if I was melting away into nothingness. Turbulent waves of sensation swept ceaselessly over my horripilating body. I had never felt so proud in my life before.

I had this strange reaction of contempt for the court, for the British officer pompously ensconced in his chair and for the police constables in their *zari*-embroidered red turbans. I wanted to rush forward and touch the feet of my husband and sacrifice my life for the cause he espoused. He was a calm, confident, radiant, resolute deity. No weakness, no gloom, no touch of grief. Rather on his lips there played mind-ravishing, energising flicker of a smile. A year's hard labour for this petty offence! What a mockery of justice! What an altar! And what a sacrifice! I was inspired to commit a hundred such petty offences.

My husband glanced fleetingly in my direction as they led him away. I saw him smile faintly and then his expression became stern. After returning from the court I ordered five rupees worth of sweets and fed the freedom fighters. That evening I participated for the first time in a political meeting organised by the Indian National Congress. I actually addressed the members and pledged to follow satyagraha. I felt a surge of power within me; I had no idea of the

source of this incredible power. When all is lost, what is there to fear? Surely the Creator couldn't have a worse calamity in store for me.

2

The next day I sent off two telegrams—one to my father, one to my father-in-law. My father-in-law subsisted on a pension and my father had a high post in the Department of Forestry. A whole day passed—no reply. Another day and still no word. The third day, letters from both of them. Furious letters.

My father-in-law wrote: "Here was I, thinking I could depend on the two of you to care for me in my old age. How sorely you've disappointed me. What do I do now—go out with a begging bowl? All I have is a small Government pension, and that will be cut off too if they find I'm siding with you."

My father's tone was milder, but his intention was similar. This was his year of grade and increment. He could be hauled up and his promotion stopped.

Yes, both were ready to give me verbal support, as much as I wanted. I tore the two letters up and decided that I would never write to them again. O selfishness! What a marvellous maya you weave on human beings! His own father, always thinking of himself, so heartless towards his own son! My father-in-law, so indifferent to his own daughter-in-law! And to learn all this at so young an age—I have a whole world of wonders waiting for me.

Till this happened I was caught up in my own little world of domestic business, but now this new problem cropped up. Without help or support, with no male in the house, how would I manage? But where could I possibly go? If only I had been born a man, I could have joined the Congress, I could have taken a job. But the fetters of femininity shackled my feet. All I could do was look pretty and sweet. I was a woman, that's all. It didn't matter if I died in the process, but my femininity had to be preserved at all costs. Not one flicker of a scandalous eyebrow could be raised against that, oh no.

I heard footsteps. I looked down. There were two men standing below. I felt like asking, *Who are you? What do you want?* And then it occurred to me: *What right have I? It's a public thoroughfare. Anyone has the right to stand there.*

I had a sudden premonition of fear which refused to go. It rankled in my heart like a persistent ember.

My body seemed to be burning. I bolted the door from the inside. There was a large knife in the house; this I placed under my pillow. But the fear kept haunting me, as if parading around the bed.

A voice called. I shivered; my hair stood on end. I placed one ear to the door; someone was rattling the bolt. My heart started pounding. *Those two! What are they up to? What do they want from me?* It was all so eerie. I did not open the door; instead I shouted from the window, "Who's rattling at the door?"

The reply calmed me. My fear vanished. It was Babu Gyanchand, my husband's best friend. I went down and opened the door. There was a lady with him, his wife. She was older to me; this was her first visit to my house; I touched her feet. It was men who made friends in our way of life; women observed the formalities.

I showed both the way up. Gyan Babu was a school teacher, a learned, large-hearted, utterly malice-free man. Today his wife had taken him in tow. A well-fleshed lady, amply endowed, with a commanding queenly presence; larded with jewellery from top to bottom; no great beauty by any stretch of imagination but an imperious figure all right. Had I had met her in any other context I might have ignored her. But at that moment she appeared to be the very embodiment of self-confidence. Her looks belied her—flint outside, gold inside.

"Did you write home?" she inquired hesitatingly.

"Yes," I replied.

"Anyone coming to fetch you?"

"No. My father doesn't want me. My father-in-law doesn't want me."

"What do you plan to do?"

"Nothing. Pass my days here, I suppose."

"Come stay with us. I won't let you live alone here."

"There are two police detectives loitering around here."

"I guessed as much."

Gyan Babu glanced at his wife as if seeking her approval. "Shall I go get a tonga?"

She looked at him with such insouciance as if to say *You still here?*

He moved fearfully towards the door.



"Wait!" she said. "How many tongas?"

"How many?" He looked worried.

"Don't you realise we'll need one for us three passengers. And where do you think the trunks, bed-rolls and pots and pans will go —on my head?"

"I'll get two," he said apprehensively.

"How much can you load in one tonga? What's wrong with you?"

"I'll get three. . .four."

"All right, but go! Small thing like this, and it takes him an hour to think it out."

Before I could say a word Gyan Babu had left. I said timidly, "Won't you be inconvenienced if I. . ."

She retorted sharply, "Yes, I will; of course I will. You'll have two full meals a day and you'll occupy a corner of my room and rub two annas worth of my oil in your hair. You don't think that an inconvenience?"

Ashamed I replied, "Please excuse me, I'm sorry."

Lovingly she put her arm around my shoulder and said, "When your husband is released, invite me, I'll happily be your guest. Pay me back that way if you wish. Satisfied? Start packing. We'll bring over the beds and heavy furniture tomorrow."

3

I had never come across such an affectionate, generous, sweet-speaking lady in my life. If I had been her younger sister she couldn't have treated me better. It was almost as if she had battled worry and anger and won a complete victory. There was always a soothing sweetness about her. She was childless, but that seemed in no way to affect her. She had engaged a young boy to help out with minor household chores, but all the rest, the hard work, she did herself. How she managed, I had no idea. She ate next to nothing but kept in the pink of health. She never rested, not even a siesta in the hottest summer. She wouldn't let me do a thing. All she did was feed me any chance she could get. In fact that was my real problem —how to avoid getting stuffed.

Hardly eight days had passed. One day I suddenly saw the two C.I.D. men in front of the house. I was upset. *Won't the wretches ever leave me alone? They follow me here too?* |

I said to her, "There they are, the two rascals, loitering around here too."

She said contemptuously, "They are dogs. Let them hang around, who cares?"

I said worriedly, "I hope they are not up to mischief."

She looked unconcerned. "All they can do is bark."

I added, "And bite."

She smiled. "They can't frighten us away out of here."

But it didn't help. I would go again and again to the window to check on them. *Why were they after me? In what way could I damage the steel frame of the bureaucracy? What power, what abilities did I have to wreak harm? Did they want to hound me out of here? How would that help them? How would it help them to see me run around destitute and forlorn? Such meanness!*

Another week passed. The two refused to leave. And here I was, my heart in my mouth, not knowing what would happen. I knew it was not right of me to take advantage of her hospitality but I did not have the courage to tell her so.

One evening Gyan Babu turned up, visibly perturbed. I was in the verandah peeling *parwals*. He walked in and beckoned to his wife.

Without getting up she said, "Why don't you first change, have a wash, eat something before you open your mouth?"

But Gyan Babu was a bundle of nerves. He had to have it all out. He insisted, "What's the matter with you? Can't you even get up? I tell you, my life is in danger!"

She kept sitting. "Why don't you come out with it? I'm here."

"No, come here."

"What's the matter? There's no one else here."

I tried to slip out. She caught hold of my hand and wouldn't let go. Gyan Babu didn't want to speak in my presence but he didn't have the patience either to check himself.

He said, "I had a quarrel with the principal today."

In a tone of mock-seriousness she said, "You did? And you beat sense into him of course, didn't you?"

"Oh do be serious. Here I am losing my job, and—"

"If you feared for your job what made you go and fight with him?"

"I didn't fight with him, I just quarrelled. He began it. He summoned me to his office and started giving me a piece of his

mind."

"Just like that."

"What can I say?"

"Tell me what happened. I look on this girl here as my sister. I don't hide anything from her."

"And supposing what I have to say concerns her?"

She read his meaning and said, "Oh, I see. It's those C.I.D. men. They've gone and spoken to your principal, have they?"

For the life of him Gyan Babu could not make out how she had succeeded in reading his mind so easily.

He said, "The police didn't speak to the principal, they went straight to the commissioner. He ordered the principal to question me."

His wife replied knowingly, "I see. And the principal told you to turn her out of your house."

"Something like that."

"And what did you have to say to him?"

"Nothing definite. What could I say? It was all so sudden."

His wife let him have it straight. "There's only one answer, isn't there? What's there to think about?"

Gyan Babu was stupefied. "But I had to have some time to decide, don't you think?"

She frowned. This was the first time I saw her in such a mood. She said, "You go this very instant to your principal and say to his face, 'There's no way I'm going to let that girl go from my house. And if you don't like the idea, you can have my resignation.' Go right now. You can wash up after you return."

On the verge of tears I said, "Sister, I don't want to be—"

She cut me short, "Shut up! You want your ears twisted? Who are you to interfere between husband and wife? We swim together or we sink together. I am ashamed of this brave husband of mine. Half his life's over and still he doesn't know how to behave."

Then, turning to her husband, she said, "What are you standing here for? If you are so afraid, shall I go and tell him?"

Gyan Babu shuffled and said, "I'll do it tomorrow, I don't know where to find him now."

I tossed restless the whole night. Here was I, spurned by father and

father-in-law, wandering homeless and alone—and to receive such affection, such respect! I said to myself, *If there ever was a goddess, she is one.*

When next day Gyan Babu left for work she said to him, “Don’t come back without settling the matter. Don’t come and tell me again that you have to think it over.”

When he was gone I said to her, “You’re doing a great injustice to me, sister. I don’t want to be any kind of burden on you.”

She smiled and said, “Had your say?”

“Yes, but I have plenty more to say.”

“Very well, but before you do that, answer me this—why was your husband jailed? Wasn’t it because he helped the freedom fighters? And who are these freedom fighters? These are the heroes of our country, the soldiers who fight our battles for us. And don’t these freedom fighters have children of their own, and don’t they have parents too, and didn’t they have work which they left behind in order to fight for the country, and haven’t they given up everything for a noble cause? The wife of a man who helps such freedom fighters, who goes to jail for their sake, is a very special person, she’s a woman whose *darshan* purifies the heart.”

I was silent. I bathed in the compassionate sea of her gratitude.

Gyan Babu returned that evening with a look of triumph on his face.

His wife asked, “What happened?”

Gyan Babu replied proudly, “I handed in my resignation and that made him come to his senses. He went straight to the police commissioner. And the two sat inside a car and they went on and on discussing I don’t know what. And then they came up to me and asked, ‘Do you go to political meetings?’ And I replied, ‘No, sir, not me.’ ‘Are you a member of the Congress Party?’ And I replied, ‘Member, sir? No. I’m not even a friend of a member.’ ‘You contribute to the Party fund?’ And I replied, ‘Not a measly pie, sir. Never.’ ”

At which point his wife embraced me warmly.

# *A Winter Night*

## 1

Halku went in and said to his wife, "Sahna's here, give me the money. I want to get him off my back."

Munni was sweeping the floor. She turned and replied, "Three rupees, that's all we have. And that's for buying our blanket. The winter nights will be so cold out in the field. Tell him we'll pay after harvest time. Tell him we don't have the money."

For an instant Halku stood still, undecided. This January was cold—he shivered sleepless in the field without the warmth of a blanket. He knew Sahna was a hard nut to crack—he'd stand there frowning and showering abuse. It was all in the hands of fate—it was a cold winter but he was sure things would change. He lumbered (he was a heavy man though his name Halku meant "light-weight") towards his wife and pleaded, "Please, do give me the money. He'll hound me for the rest of my life. I'll find a way to buy the blanket."

His wife moved away and looked at him angrily. "Find a way, find a way! That's all you ever say! As if you ever *do* anything! Who'll give you a blanket in charity? How are we ever going to clear our debt? Why don't you listen to me, why don't you give up farming? Slog the whole day—and what do we get out of it? Our whole life's spent in paying off debts. Go and do some manual labour for a change. Farming's no good, no good at all. Don't ask me for money, I won't give it."

Halku said plaintively, "He'll abuse me."

Munni flared up. "Abuse you, why? Does he think he owns this place?"

So saying, she paused; the creased furrows on her forehead

relaxed. There was bitter truth in Halku's words, a truth that prowled around her like a predacious beast.

She went to the niche, took out three rupee coins, placed them in Halku's hands and said, "I'm telling you, give up farming. Get some work as a day labourer. At least you'll earn enough to feed the two of us. At least there'll be no one to shout at us. Fine farming this is—whatever you earn from it, goes back into it—on top of that, abuse on our heads."

Halku took the money and left, feeling as if he was carrying his heart in his hands. These three rupees had been saved up, hard-earned paisa by paisa, to buy the blanket. And today they would be gone. With each step he took, his head felt more and more bowed as if under the weight of irremovable penury.

2

Dark January night. Stars shivering in the sky. Halku lay on a bamboo cot in the open field under a makeshift canopy; he was trembling under the coarse cotton *chaddar* he had wrapped himself in. Under the cot lay his pet dog Jabra, muzzle snuggled in stomach, whining piteously. Both man and dog restless, sleepless.

Halku pressed his knees tight against his chest and said, "Cold, Jabra, no? Didn't I tell you you'd be better off at home lying on a bed of straw? What made you come here? So shiver and suffer, what can I do? You thought I was going to have a feast of *halwa-puris*, no? And you ran ahead and waited for me here, no? Serve you right!"

Jabra wagged his tail and let out a long low whine, yawned, and fell silent. Perhaps his canine instinct sensed that his moaning kept his master awake.

Halku reached out his hand, stroked Jabra's cold back and said, "No more coming here from tomorrow or I'm warning you I'll beat you. What a cold, bitter, icy wind there is from the west tonight. I'll get up and fill my *chellum*—that's one way to pass the night. I've finished eight *chellums* already. No fun being a farmer. Of course there are the lucky ones who are always so warm that winter's afraid to come near them. Thick mattresses, quilts, blankets. . . . Winter daren't touch them! It's all fate. Some do the dirty work, others have the fun."

Halku got up and stuffed his *chellum* with smouldering cinders

from the fire. Jabra sat up too.

Puffing at his *chellum* Halku said, "Want a puff? The cold won't go away but you'll feel it a little less." Jabra stared up at him with eyes moist with affection.

"It's only for today," Halku said. "I'll get some straw for you tomorrow. You can snuggle up in it and you won't feel cold."

Jabra placed his paws on Halku's knees and brought his muzzle close to his master's face. Halku could feel the warm panting.

Having finished his *chellum*, Halku lay down, determined to go to sleep, but no sooner had he stretched himself on the cot than his heart started pounding. He tossed restless this way and that, but the cold was a bloodsucking ogre straddling his chest.

When the cold became unendurable, he gently picked Jabra up, stroked his head, and took him in his lap. The dog had an unpleasant odour but Halku clasped him tight; he experienced a pulsing happiness that he'd never known for months and months. For Jabra it was heaven itself; and for Halku there was nothing but the purest affection for the dog, the same affection he would have for a close friend or for his own brother. He wasn't angry at the poverty which had reduced him to this pitiable condition. On the contrary, he was happy that his poverty had opened for him the doors of such a beautiful friendship; every fibre in his body glowed with the warmth of his compassion for the dog.

Jabra sensed the approach of another creature. His devotion had made his senses all the more alert; even the cold blasts of wind had not succeeded in dimming his reflexes. He bounded up, dashed outside the cane canopy, and began barking. Halku called him back, but he did not budge. He ran about the four corners of the field, yelping furiously. He would briefly return, then scamper out again. It seemed he had only one burning desire—and that was to do his duty at all costs and to his master's complete satisfaction.

### 3

Another hour passed. Fierce gusts of biting wind fanned the night. Halku sat up, and put his head between his knees pulled up tight against his chest. It was cold, so cold, so blood-freezing cold. It wasn't blood flowing in his veins anymore, it was snow. He looked up at the sky—how much more of the freezing night was left? The seven sages of the Great Bear stood watching from half way up in

the sky. Till they stared from right on top it would not be dawn. Still more than three hours of bitter cold left.

A marble's throw away from Halku's field was a mango grove. Leaf-fall had commenced and the ground was littered with dry mango leaves. Halku thought: *I'll collect the leaves and start a small fire with them. But if anyone sees me at night gathering leaves, they'll think I'm a ghost. And what if there is a wild animal lurking around. . . . But sitting like this is impossible, I have to get up and do something!*

From a nearby field of *arhar* pulse he uprooted a few stalks and improvised a small broom; with a flaming cowdung cake in his hand to light the way, he proceeded to the grove. Jabra saw him coming and wagged his tail vigorously.

Halku said, "I can't stand it anymore, Jabra, let's go to the grove and get some leaves, it's going to be a long shivering night."

Jabra growled approval and trotted ahead.

Dense darkness in the mango grove; a cruel wind threshing the leaves about. Dew drops from the trees plopping on the ground. Suddenly a fragrance of henna flowers wafted across to him.

Halku said, "What a sweet scent, Jabru. You smell anything?"

But Jabra was busy rooting out a bone he had sniffed and discovered.

Placing the burning cowdung cake on the ground, Halku started picking up the dry mango leaves. In a short time he had a whole heap in front of him. His hands were shivering. His bare feet felt numb but he continued assiduously on his leaf-picking task. He would place these leaves in a dry-gourd pot, ignite them and annihilate the all-enveloping cold.

He lit the dry-gourd fire. The flames licked at the overhanging mango leaves. In the flickering light the thickly clustered mango trees stood like occult beings bearing the pitch darkness on their heads. In that infinite oceanic dark the wavering flames of the fire undulated like a bobbing boat.

Halku sat warming himself in front of the gourd. Quickly he removed his coarse sheet and placed it beside him; he straddled his legs in front of the fire as if defying the cold. "Do your worst, who cares?" It was more victory cry than challenge—he had conquered the cold and he wanted the world to know. He looked at Jabra, "How are things now, Jabbar—not cold anymore, is it?"

Jabbar whined pleasantly as if to say, "I'm not cold now."



"Wish I had thought of this gourd fire earlier."

Jabra wagged his tail.

"Come, let's jump over this gourd. Let's see who does it better. If you fall in the fire, sorry, boy, you are on your own, you won't get any help from me."

Jabra stared distressfully at the fire.

"And don't you go telling Munni tomorrow about this or she'll scream our heads off."

Saying this he stood up, poised himself, and leapt clean over the fire. The flames brushed his feet but he was past caring. Jabra circled the fire and squatted beside him.

"No, no, not like that! *Over the fire!*" ordered Halku.

The dog cleared the gourd in one smooth jump.

4

The dry leaves became ashes. Darkness descended on the grove again. A few embers smouldered in the heap, fanned into fitful flame by sporadic gusts of wind, collapsing as quickly as created.

Halku wrapped the *chaddar* around himself, sat near the warm embers, and began humming a folk tune. He could feel the warmth, but it was a helpless battle against the intensity of the cold; and slowly drowsiness overtook him.

Jabra ran towards the field, barking loudly. Halku realised that it was probably a herd of animals. Some white-footed deer had strayed into the field—he could hear clearly their leaping and bounding. And then it seemed that they had started grazing—he could hear their champing.

He thought: *No, it can't be. Jabra's in the field. Why doesn't he claw and bite them away? What's wrong? Strange! I don't hear a sound. Am I hearing things?*

He shouted, "Jabra, Jabra!"

Loud barking. But no sign of Jabra.

Again the rustle of champing in the field. No, it wasn't his imagination. It's just that he didn't want to get up from where he was sitting. He was so comfortable! To go out in the chilly field and chase deer away—unthinkable. He was quite happy where he was.

He yelled, "Lihoo! Liho! Liho!"

He heard Jabra bark in reply. There were animals in the field. The harvest was ready—a splendid harvest too—but these beasts

would reduce it soon to a shamble.

*I must get up!* thought Halku. He hadn't taken two steps when a blast of fierce cold wind hit him, like needles, like a scorpion's sting, and he scurried back fearfully to the safety of his gourd-fire warmth; he stirred the dying embers to provoke a little more heat.

Jabra was barking his throat dry, the deer were munching to their hearts' content, and Halku continued to relax blissfully in the warmth of the fading embers, as if trapped in a web of ultimate and inescapable futility.

Covering himself with his *chaddar*, he stretched out beside the dying embers, and dozed off.

When he opened his eyes, bright sunlight dazzled him.

He heard Munni saying, "What's wrong with you? Wake up! Here you are sleeping away, and the whole field's a ruin."

Halku sat up. "You mean you are coming from the field?"

"Of course I'm coming from the field," Munni replied. "The whole thing's in ruins. Come on, wake up! The way you sleep! The hut out there in the field—what help has it been to us?"

"Here I am dying, and all you can think of is your field," said Halku, furiously thinking up an excuse. "I had a shooting pain in my stomach, I can't even tell you how bad it was."

Both walked up to the edge of the field. They saw a scene of devastation, and Jabra lying trampled, inert, under the makeshift canopy.

Both looked at the ravaged field. Pain on Munni's face, joy on Halku's.

Worried, Munni said, "Now you'll *have* to become a day labourer."

Halku said happily, "At least I'll be spared the ordeal of sleeping in the bitter cold."

# *Jail*

## 1

When Mridula returned to the women's ward after the court sitting, her face was lit up—the prospects of acquittal appeared to be bright. A knot of political prisoners cornered her asking, "How long?"

Mridula replied confidently, "I didn't mince my words, I said it out straight: 'You're the judge, you decide.' I told him: 'I stopped no one, I pushed no one, I coerced no one, I wasn't involved in the *dharna*. Yes, I was standing in front of the shop. Some volunteers had been arrested there. A crowd collected. I stood and watched.' And I get arrested in the bargain!"

Kshama-devi who knew a bit of law said, "The Magistrate will go by the police evidence. I've seen hundreds of these cases—and I know what happens."

"I gave the police something to think about," replied Mridula. "I wanted no part in the investigation but I couldn't help myself when I heard their witnesses blurting out lie after lie. I started cross-questioning them. Did they think me a fool or what? I too know a bit of law. The police thought I'd keep silent, and they'd get away by faking the evidence. But my cross-questioning made them sit up. I proved all three witnesses liars. Believe me, I didn't like doing it. The Magistrate rebuked the Inspector a couple of times when he gave wild answers to my questions; he said, 'Stick to the point.' And the Inspector's face fell. I can tell you—I silenced them all. He hasn't given his decision yet, but I know I'm going to be acquitted. I'm not afraid of jail, but I don't like anyone making a fool of me. The secretary and the other women who were present there—all were sure I'd be acquitted."

Looking spitefully at her, the women prisoners left. Some were

undergoing a year's jail term, some six months. They had never dared speak out in court. To do that was sinful! By her cross-questioning Mridula had demeaned herself. In their eyes, a jail sentence might have made her behaviour excusable, but acquittal rendered even repentance out of the question.

From a distance one of the women said, "Nice and cozy way of getting free! We could have done the same, but we didn't. We became martyrs at the altar of the injustice of bureaucracy."

Another said, "It's like falling at their feet and begging for mercy. What did she go to the shop for if it wasn't to join the *dharna*? She gets the volunteers arrested—and herself is free as a bird. And now what do you know—she pretends she is all innocent! Not a shred of self-respect!"

A third sneered, "It takes courage to go to jail. She eagerly took the praise then—and now it's all snivelling and whimpering! Such women should have no part in national movements—they bring a bad name on all of us."

Kshama-devi, lost in thought, stood near Mridula. A seditious speech had got her a year's sentence; she had been transferred here only a month ago from another district jail, with another eight months to serve. She found it difficult to get on with the fifteen other prisoners. She disliked their petty squabbles, she disliked flattering the lady wardens for any extra make-up odds and ends, she disliked showing any eagerness to meet her family members. Malice and rumours were part of the jail's atmosphere. The inmates lacked the self-respect which she thought was essential to a political prisoner. She stayed aloof from them. Her national fervour had no parallel; she was steeped in patriotism. The others felt that she thought no end of herself, and countered her indifference to them with equal indifference.

Mridula had been in custody for eight days. In that short time she developed a special fondness for Kshama-devi. She was devoid of meanness or jealousy, she disliked running down others, she had no passion for self-prettification, and no interest in flippant crudities. Compassion, service, patriotism—only these mattered to her.

Kshama had hoped to pass a pleasant six months in her company. No such luck. Mridula was being released the next day. There was none other with whom she could discuss her problems, or the nation's—they were all such a conceited lot.

Mridula said, "Sister, you still have eight months to go, no?"

Kshama replied regretfully, "They'll pass somehow or other, but I won't easily forget you. We've really come close to each other in the past week, haven't we? Jail hasn't been jail since you've come here. Keep in touch, won't you?"

Mridula noticed Kshama's eyes were moist, and replied reassuringly, "Of course I will, sister. It won't be easy for me either, and I'll bring Bhan along too. 'Your aunt's here', I'll tell him. 'Let's go visit her.' Oh, he'll come running. I can tell you this, sister, the only one I missed was Bhan. He must have missed me too. 'Where did you go? Why did you leave me? Won't thpeak to you—go 'way!' He's quite a brat, sister. Not still for one second—first thing in the morning he's singing away—'Fly high my countly's flag!' 'In my deepeth heart of heart, Is the temple of Swaraj.' Then placing a flag on his shoulders he shouts, 'Down with dlinking!'—he looks so sweet.

"His father works in an English firm and wants to resign. But I don't let him. One has to be practical, you know, I have to make both ends meet. He'd resign the next day if it wasn't for me—I'm the one who keeps a cool head. I wonder how he manages these days, what with office and looking after Bhan.

"Bhan doesn't like going to my mother-in-law. Amma-ji is an old lady and she really can't manage him. She wants to cuddle and spoil him and he just doesn't like it at all. What worries me is that she is upset with me. She hasn't once come to see me. Yesterday in court my father-in-law told me that she is very angry. She hasn't eaten for three days. 'This wretch of a girl has ruined the family honour, blackened our family name, brought ill-luck on us, the hag!' God knows what else she said. I don't mind, she's one of the old-fashioned types. You can't expect her to become like one of us. I'll have to go and fawn and flatter her. Take my word for it, there'll be a *katha* session tomorrow—feeding of Brahmins and the usual get-together—she has to wash off my prison sins, you know. Do come and stay with us a couple of days then—I'll arrange the parole."

Kshama is alone, a widow, and so knows nothing of these domestic delights. She lost both husband and son in the Jalianwala Bagh massacre. She has no one now she can call her own. She lacks the large heart to make all mankind her family. For over ten years she tried to bring peace to her troubled heart by selflessly serving the

nation. She dedicated her life to root out the causes which reduced her to such a pitiable condition. Having already made the major part of her sacrifice, all that she has left to offer in the sacred fire of patriotism is the intensity of her devotion to her motherland. For others love of one's country is a noble pursuit or a search for fame; for Kshama it turned into a religious ardour, and she focused her entire feminine strength and faith on that objective. Even the freest of sky-ranging birds has a nest to return to, but Kshama has none. On occasions when this homelessness produced in her a pronounced anguish, Mridula's presence had a benign influence on her. But even this grace was denied her now.

In a choking voice Kshama said, "You will forget me soon, Mridula. For you it's only a brief encounter, two trains passing in the night, broken promises. If we meet somewhere again, will you recognize me or turn away with a polite smile and a *namasté*? That's the way of the world. Who cares for others' problems when there are so many of one's own? You mean a great deal to me. Do think of me sometimes—even that little will sustain me—beggars can't be choosers."

Mridula was acquitted the next day. After a tearful farewell she went away in the evening, as if leaving her parents and going to her in-laws.

## 2

Three months passed—not a sign of Mridula. The others had visitors, received food-gifts and other presents—but nothing for Kshama. From early morning of the last Sunday of each month Kshama would wait expectantly for Mridula. And when the visiting hour passed she would whisper sadly, "That's the way the world is."

Rising from her evening puja one day, Kshama saw Mridula coming towards her. Dull-looking, lustreless. They embraced and Kshama said, "What have you done to yourself, Mridula? You look so changed! Have you been ill?"

Mridula burst into tears. "No, not ill, sister—just so many problems. But I'm free from worries now and I've come to make up for my negligence."

Kshama trembled. A wave of fear rose within her and she saw her past life bobbing like a frail boat on it. "Is everything really

all right? You didn't *have* to come, it's only three months."

With a sad smile Mridula replied, "Yes, everything's all right. No worries at all. I can spend the rest of my days here now. At last I have realised how much affection you have for me."

Mournfully she continued, "You don't get all the news. Two days ago there was a police firing in the village. They are collecting taxes with the help of bayonets these days. But how can farmers pay tax when they haven't any money? Grain prices are falling every day. You can get a maund of wheat for a rupee and twelve annas. My mother-in-law says that wheat prices never fell so low in all her lifetime. The income from the harvest isn't enough to cover even the seed cost. Leave aside the labour and irrigation. And believe it or not the Government has ordered the use of force to realise the tax. The farmers are prepared to mortgage their huts and auction off their property, but all the officials care about is showing off their authority. Even if they grind the farmers to powder the Government isn't going to say a thing. In fact, it encourages oppression. Tax—that's all it wants. Live or die—who cares. Most of the Zamindars are so afraid that they refuse to collect the tax, so the police are sent to help them out. The whole of Bhairongunj district has been looted. Dying men have no choice, they are abandoning their villages wholesale. Some constables started beating up a farmer in his own hut. Unable to control herself, his ill-fated wife lashed out at them. What can I say, then and there one of the constables stripped her naked. Sister, I can't tell you how ashamed I am —our *own* people behaving like animals — it's unbelievable. The farmer went wild. These poor people work so hard; they don't even get a full meal every day; they are so dispirited and listless; but I can tell you there's still some manhood left in them. He was lying there beaten half-conscious. Roused by his wife's screams he sprang up and knocked the constable down. They began grappling. A mere farmer misbehaving like this with a constable—you can't expect the police to take it lying down. They ganged up and beat the poor man to death."

Kshama said, "Are you telling me that the other villagers stood by and watched the fun?"

Mridula continued in a shrill voice, "Sister, we poor folk are done for either way. Whenever a handful of us used to get together the police would declare us hostile. There would be a *lathi-*

charge, and if any of us retaliated by hurling a stray stone they'd start firing. A few would get wounded, the others would disperse. But when this farmer died, they got really worked up! They ran out with *lathis* and surrounded the constables. I think a couple of them used their *lathis* too. Some constables were hurt, and then they resorted to firing. Twelve villagers were shot dead and many were badly injured. Small men abusing the big authority they have. They massacred half the village and left flushed with victory. Who listens to villagers' complaints? They are poor, humble, infirm—so kill as many as you like. They expect nothing from courts and magistrates. After all, wasn't it the Government itself that sent these constables to pacify the farmers? The people appealed to the neighbouring villagers for help. When all is lost, at least sympathy is left. The police wouldn't even allow that—they cordoned the village. Rubbing salt on the wound—this was the last straw! Beat a person, and when he cries, beat him up more. So all they could do was carry the corpses to the town. News of this uproar had already spread like wildfire. The refusal of the police to allow a procession to be taken out infuriated the already tense crowd. A mob gathered. I cautioned my father-in-law, 'It's a nasty mob, please don't go!' And he replied, 'Don't worry, I won't take any risks.' When the bier was lifted fifty thousand people formed the procession. A five hundred strong armed contingent, consisting of mounted police, constables and sergeants, blocked their way. Such cowards, brandishing their guns in front of the unarmed crowd—without a twinge of conscience! When repeated warning failed to disperse the crowd, firing was ordered, which continued for over an hour. Who knows how many died, how many were wounded. My house fronts the street; I stood on the balcony, apprehensive, both my hands on my heart in a vain attempt to check my trembling.

"With the first volley thousands panicked and fled. It's all so vivid even now. So terrifying, so hair-raising, so shameful. You could see the fear in their eyes. But there was a hard core of committed heroes, who stood firm as a rock, facing the hail of bullets and not retreating an inch. Above the indiscriminate noise of the firing rose the loud concerted sky-shattering victory slogans of these brave fighters. So exciting, so inspiring! I wanted to rush out and face the bullets—I *wanted* to—I wanted to die happy and smiling. Death seemed so easy and simple then. Ammaji was inside



with Bhan—she kept calling me to come in. I didn't. So she came to the balcony with the boy. Right then I saw a dozen men come to our front door with a stretcher on which lay my husband's dead body. Ammaji saw him. Oh yes, she guessed. I felt faint. She glanced at her son, embraced him, kissed him, blessed him and in a daze wandered out into the main road where shouts of victory could still be heard. I kept staring stupidly, now at my husband, now at her, stock-still, without a word, without a tear. I felt nothing. Completely numb."

Kshama asked, "You mean your mother-in-law went to the site of the firing?"

Mridula replied, "Strangely enough, she did, sister. She was the one who would put her hands to her ears the moment she heard gunshots. The sight of blood would make her swoon. But now she pushed through the ranks of the brave satyagrahis to the front; she was instantly shot down. That broke their patience, that shattered their vow of non-violence. A consuming rage possessed them. Though unarmed, they actually counter-attacked. Seeing the tidal wave approach, the sepoy's fled, firing wildly. Bhan was standing on the balcony, a chance bullet hit him in the chest. My little darling fell dead in front of my eyes; still no tears came. I took him in my lap; blood was gushing from his chest. Sister, it's as if he was returning all the mother's milk I'd given him. I was drenched red; I was hysterical. I pictured myself dressed in gorgeous red silk on his wedding day. Boyhood, youth, old age—all over in one flash. I placed him on top of his father. By this time a few volunteers had brought Ammaji's body too. Straight and still, with a faint smile on her lips. To think that she stopped me, and herself gladly faced death as if it was a road to heaven. She lived for her son; how could she let him go alone?

"The sight of the three bodies laid on the pyre by the riverside snapped me out of my daze. For an instant I felt an urge to be with them, to go with my family and be in the presence of God in heaven. Then it occurred to me what had I done to deserve such a reward. Believe me, sister, as the flames licked the pyre I saw Ammaji with Bhan in her lap smiling at me and my husband standing beside her inspiring me, 'Be brave. Go and do your duty.' His face dazzled. It's true, sister, isn't it, that God dwells in fire and in the blood of martyrs?

"I lifted my head. I saw countless pyres ablaze along the river

bank. It was a fire-festival lit by the gods in which simmered the auspicious future of India.

"Soon all was ashes. Then we returned. But I hadn't the courage to go home. Home wasn't home any more. My home is now wherever I am, or it's the funeral pyre. I went straight to the Mahila Ashram. There was nothing left of the Congress Committee after yesterday's firing. The Party was declared seditious. The police raided and locked the office premises. They searched and locked the Mahila Ashram as well. So we made a makeshift office under the shade of a tree and briskly went about our business. No doors to get locked up here. We were free, free as the wind.

"We decided to take out a procession in the evening—it was imperative to do so in order to commemorate yesterday's bloodshed. There are always those who don't see the point in taking out processions. The point is we are alive, we haven't given up. We prove we have a spirit that can't be crushed. We show that we are not afraid of bullets and barbarity, that we will destroy any system based on selfishness and violence. The police thought it a sufficient show of authority by stopping our procession. You know, sister, we got the wrong impression that yesterday's atrocity had stirred their conscience. But no, they didn't feel guilty, they were out to get us. Our likes and dislikes were irrelevant. They issued a ban order, with the warning that any further action would lead to serious consequences. But what we did—that really taught them a lesson. Fifty thousand of us assembled in the evening. I was chosen leader for to-day. I experienced a strange elation, a strength I never suspected I possessed.

"Imagine me, a weak nothing of a woman, with no experience of the world, me, who never set foot outside my home, through the life-sacrifice of my loved ones I have found something which no officers or even maharajas ever get—power over the hearts of so many people. The police are only mercenaries—they have to live too, so they do what they do.

"A maharaja is obeyed out of fear or desire for profit. But what profit could they expect from me, what fear could I threaten them with? And think of it, sister, they were ready to follow me to death. I became a symbol of sacrifice for them. Their passion for freedom, their struggle to break the fetters of slavery—that's what I stood for!

"The procession had hardly started when the police produced a

warrant for my arrest. The warrant made me think of you. There was a time you needed me and my sympathy. Now, sister, I need you. But now I'm not weak any more. No worries. Prison sentences don't frighten me—I welcome them. Police insult and injustice—I welcome that too. I know that whatever I can do outside jail, I can do equally well inside jail. Outside jail you make mistakes, you stray, you compromise principles, there's jealousy, there's friction; inside jail is a clear line of morality which no devil can defile. The wind steals the heat from a blazing fire in an open field; but inside a boiler the same fire becomes a concentrated source of energy."

By this time the other women had started gathering. Mridula embraced them one by one. Shouts of "*Bharat Mata ki Jai!*"—"Victory to Mother India!"—pierced through the doors and reached the sky.

# *A Holi Present*

## 1

Maikulal came to Amarkant's house for a round of chess and saw Amarkant preparing to go out.

"Leaving? Where?" he asked. "How about a few rounds of chess first? If you're free, that is."

Amarkant put the mirror and comb in the wooden chest and replied, "No, *bhai*, not today. I'm off to my in-laws tomorrow. I have a lot of packing to do."

Maikulal: "But that's tomorrow—what's the hurry? It's a stone's throw from here. I see, it's the first time, is that it?"

Amarkant: "That's right, *yaar*, first time it is. I'm not eager but my father-in-law insists. . . . You know. . . ."

Maikulal: "So that's all right, that's tomorrow evening. You'll be there in half-an-hour."

Amarkant: "What can I say, I'm so nervous. All these days I've seen my wife only in my dreams. And now it's all going to come true. Dreams are so beautiful, I wonder what the reality will be. Who knows. . . ."

Maikulal: "I hope you have the present. You can't go empty-handed. She won't like it."

Amarkant had not bought any present. Gift-giving was an art he hadn't begun cultivating yet.

Maikulal said, "You really are the limit! A first visit—and what do you think she'll think of you?"

Amarkant: "But what shall I take? You know, it never occurred to me. Tell me, what can I give? Something not too expensive yet good. I have to send money to grandfather, I don't have too much on me."

Maikulal had separated from his parents. "Oh, grandfather is it? He wants money? You can't refuse him, naturally," he said sarcastically. "Grandfather asking money—that's not a small thing, I know."

Missing the irony completely, Amarkant said, "Yes, I couldn't even afford new clothes for Holi this time. But since you say it's the thing to do, then I'll have to get a present. But something within my means."

And so the two friends began discussing this profound matter, because the happy future of the married couple—or indeed the unhappy one—depended on it. It's the first impressions that matter in life, and the first present is all-important. They argued and argued—with no result.

Just then a Parsi lady in the latest-fashion sari passed by slowly in a car.

Maikulal said, "That's it! *That's* the sari you want to make her happy. Look at the delicate shade, it's the perfect present. I just can't take my eyes off it. Let's go to Hashim's and buy it. Can't be more than twentyfive rupees."

Amarkant was no less enchanted. Yes, his bride would be delighted, he thought; the pastel shade would set off her honeygold complexion.

He said, "*Yaar*, you're right. It's the perfect thing. But I hear that the freedom fighters are picketing Hashim's shop."

"So what? Let them picket. Buyers will buy what they want to buy. Who's going to stop us?"

Amarkant said apologetically, "Yes, you're right. But don't ask me to slip through the picket line. I can't. And there's always this crowd of jeering watchers hanging around for the fun."

Condescendingly, Maikulal said, "Slip in through the back door. There's no picket there."

"Why don't we go instead to one of these *desi* Indian shops and buy it there?"

"You won't get that kind of sari anywhere except at Hashim's."

Evening. Festivity time in Aminabad. Faint memories of the sun's splendour lingered in flickering flashes of light tingeing the bubbly clouds of evening.

Amarkant unobtrusively walked up to the entrance of Hashim's shop. The picketers were there, and so were the fun-watchers. Once or twice Amarkant plucked up courage to enter, but he never got beyond the footpath.

But the sari had to be bought. He couldn't get it out of his mind. It obsessed him.

He decided finally that he would try the shop's back entrance. He had a quick look—yes, no picketer in sight. A few quick steps, and he was inside. About twenty minutes later he had an exact duplicate of the sari he had seen. He returned to the back entrance—what a complete turn of events! Three picketers stood there. Uncertain, he waited a minute or so at the door; then he shot forth like an arrow and kept on running blindly. Just his bad luck, an old woman, with a walking stick, crossed his path. They collided; she fell; and she let loose a stream of abuse—"What's got in your eyes? A tubful of grease! Can't you see where you're going! Young upstarts! You won't remain young all your life!"

Amarkant stooped, helped the old lady up and begged her pardon; but by this time three of the picketers had caught up with him. One of them fingered the sari packet and said, "Foreign stuff—not allowed. Why didn't you stop when we called you?"

The second said, "Whizzed off like a thief, that's what he did!"

The third: "Thousands are going to jail, the whole country's on fire, and he's still running after foreign goods!"

Amarkant clutched the packet firmly and said, "Will you let me go or no?"

The first picketer grabbed at the packet and replied, "Let you go? Never! Not with foreign goods on you. Never!"

Amarkant snatched it back saying, "Who are you to stop me?"

He took a step forward and found his path blocked by two picketers who had spread themselves flat on the ground in front of him. A real problem! Just the thing he had wanted to avoid! In less than a minute a score of picketers surrounded him. A shower of taunts fell on him from all sides.

"Looks like a gentleman!"

"Calls himself educated. *Chheel*! Shame on him! Every day four or five of us court arrest in front of this shop, but this fellow here, what does he care?"

"Confiscate the packet! Let him go tell the police if he wants to."

He stood there as if shackled. How would he ever get out of this? He hated Maikulal for getting him into this mess. The idea of giving a present had never occurred to him. God knows why Maikulal had to turn up with weird notions of gift-giving.

The taunts continued; followed by snatch-and-grab. Someone removed his cap. They pounced on him; the sari packet was forcibly seized from his grasp; it passed from hand to hand and disappeared.

Irritated, Amarkant said, "I'll lodge a diary with the police."

One of them said, "Yes, yes, go ahead, put us in trouble, get us arrested!"

A young girl in khaddar sari with a satchel stepped forward; seeing the hullabaloo she said, "What's going on? Why are you harassing this good man?"

Amarkant's spirits revived. He pleaded: "They snatched my packet away. It's daylight robbery, that's what it is. And they call it satyagraha, they think it's love of the country!"

The girl assured him, "Don't worry. You'll get your packet back. Where can it go, it must be with them. What's in it?"

One of the picketers replied, "Sister, he bought some clothes from Hashim's shop."

The girl: "What does it matter what shop he got them from! How dare you take what belongs to him. Give it back—now!"

In the same split second in which it had disappeared, Amarkant's sari rematerialised. A little later the crowd dispersed, the picketers left.

Amarkant thanked the girl. "If you hadn't turned up, I would have lost the sari and got beaten up too."

She said in gentle rebuke, "There's such a thing as the will of the people. Why did you have to go and buy from *that* shop? You know the way we Indians are persecuted, and yet you had to go and do this. Shameful! Those who know what's right and still do otherwise—what does one do with them?"

Embarrassed, Amarkant forgot all the selfishness he was fond of airing in front of his friends. He said, "Don't misunderstand, it's not for me. It's this lady, you see, and she wanted it very much, and you know one can't refuse. . . ."

"And you mean to tell me that you didn't explain things to her?"

"Had you explained, she might have understood. I did what I

could but it didn't work."

"I'll do what I can if I get a chance. What will you men ever do without us women? Which part of the city are you from?"

"Saadganj."

"Your good name?"

"Amarkant."

She quickly covered her face with her sari-end, lowered her head and said softly with a shy affection in her voice, "Your wife is not with you, so how could she ask?"

Stunned, Amarkant asked, "Which part of the city are you from?"

"Ghasiyarimandi."

"Is your name Sukhda-devi?"

"Could be. There are many ladies with that name in our area."

"And your father is Jwaladatta-ji?"

"Could be. There are many men with that name."

Amarkant pulled out a matchbox from his pocket and, in front of her very eyes, set fire to the sari.

Sukhda said, "You are coming tomorrow?"

Amarkant said thickly, "No, Sukhda, until I do penance for this, I'll not be coming."

Sukhda was about to add something when Amarkant speedily disappeared in the other direction.

3

It's Holi today, but not for the freedom fighters. For them it's neither Holi nor spring. The picketing continues in front of Hashim's shop. The fun-watchers still hang around. With this difference—Amarkant is one of the picketers now. He's in khaddar *kurta* and dhoti, and in his hand is the Congress tri-colour.

One picketer said, "This is what I call bravery. Look at yourself yesterday and look at yourself now. If Sukhda-devi hadn't done this, where would you have been?"

Amarkant said, "I have to thank you all for this. I wouldn't be here but for you."

"But you shouldn't have come today. Sukhda-devi said she wouldn't let you come today."

"I dare not show her my face after what happened yesterday. She's such a young girl and if she can do so much, surely we can



do a lot more. Specially when we men don't have to mind the children."

Suddenly a police van drove up, a sub-inspector got down, approached the picketers and said, "You're under arrest."

Shouts of "Vande Mataram!" Commotion among the fun-watchers. Step by step the group marched ahead. The picketers did *pranam* to the spectators and smilingly climbed into the van, with Amarkant leading. As the van's engine started Sukhda-devi ran up as if out of nowhere. She had a garland in her hand. The van door was open. She climbed up and placed the garland around Amarkant's neck. Two tears of pride and love slipped down her cheeks.

This was Holi, this was her joyful union at the time of Holi.

She stood in front of the shop and shouted, "It's treason to buy foreign clothes! It's treason to wear foreign clothes!"

## *A Tale of Two Oxen*

The donkey is reputed to be a fool. We are in the habit of describing stupid human beings as donkeys. No one knows if the donkey is foolish or simple, and he does not say. God knows, he may be the cleverest of us all; cows have been known to bellow and charge, dogs our best friends bark and bite, but no donkey has ever shown anger.

Beat him, he bears it; give him damp hay, he'll go to it with relish. Springtime, we are told, elicits a few happy brays, but rarely is a donkey ecstatic. His face is a mask of poise, ascetic detachment and self-control. The stream of joy and sorrow, loss and gain, passes him by. Our finest rishis have not attained the donkey's remarkable selflessness, yet we insist on calling him a fool. An unkind cut this, belittling genius. Doesn't it reveal how contemptuous we are of simplicity?

Cousin to the ass is the ox. There are some who would call the ox a greater idiot, but this is presumptuous. The ox has often hit out, and some oxen are extremely stubborn. There are many other ways in which the ox shows he is dissatisfied with a miserable state of affairs; consequently, we must grant that he is second to the ass in idiocy.

Jhuri had two oxen, Hira and Moti, splendid creatures, tall, sturdy, as hardworking as locomotives. They were good friends and fond of conversation.

One day, Jhuri decided to send Hira and Moti to his mother-in-law's. The oxen were bewildered, they thought they had been sold. I could not tell you if they relished the idea, but Gaya, the brother of Jhuri's wife, nearly gave up trying to take them to their new home. He struck their flanks on the left, meaning he wanted them to turn right—and they turned left. When he twisted their tails, they

stopped in the middle of the road. When he pulled them by the ropes, they began backing.

The sun had set when they came to the new village. Their tongues lolled, they were hungry and tired, but when the hay barrel was brought before them, they had not the heart to eat. They felt homeless, uprooted, in the middle of a new village among strange people.

They looked at each other sadly, and lay down to rest. Late that night, when the village was sleeping, they pulled fiercely at the ropes which bound them, the ropes snapped, and Hira and Moti galloped for home.

Imagine Jhuri's surprise when he saw his two oxen back in the courtyard the next morning, their ropes dangling besides them, hooves caked with slush and dust, eyes filled with overwhelming happiness.

Unable to contain himself, he ran out, clasped them both to his neck, and caressed them.

The village children clustered round the oxen, clapping and laughing. Such an event had never happened before. Young girls scampered out of their huts with *chappatis*, molasses, fresh grass and sweet hay.

"Give them certificates!" shouted some.

"Such oxen!" said another.

"All the way back!"

"Galloping too!"

"Must have been human beings in their previous birth."

Jhuri's wife was furious. "Ungrateful dolts!" she said to her husband. "To run away without a single day's honest work! They should be taught a lesson!"

"Now, now," said Jhuri. "It's very likely they didn't get enough to eat."

She flared with pride. "You are not the only one who knows how to feed oxen!" she shouted. "The rest do not keep them on water, if that's what you think."

"I don't see why they ran away if they were fed well," said Jhuri.

"Don't you?" said his wife. "I'll tell you. Because the others are not soft like you. They feed their oxen well, but they expect work out of them. These two idiots don't want to work, that's what." She stopped. "I'll see to that," she continued. "From now on they're getting dry hay, all the time. Let them take it or leave it."

A bricklike, insipid flavour assailed the noses of the oxen that afternoon. They looked into the hay barrels. No juice, no richness. They looked with melancholy eyes at their master.

"Give them a few oil-cakes," Jhuri told the stable boy.

"But," faltered the boy, "the mistress said. . . ."

Jhuri winked at him. "Do it on the sly," and left.

Jhuri's brother-in-law turned up the next morning to reclaim his oxen; this time he yoked them firmly to a cart.

Moti tried upsetting the cart into a ditch but was restrained by Hira. Hira's patience was proverbial.

Gaya yoked them next day to the plough, but soon discovered they would not budge an inch, stick-beatings and tail-twistings notwithstanding. But when he clouted Hira on the nose with a stick, Moti, unable to contain himself, ran off with the plough. What a speed he put up! By the time he was through, the plough was all in pieces.

"Don't be foolish," whispered Hira fiercely, running alongside Moti. "You know we can't get away."

"I couldn't stand the clout he gave you," shouted Moti. "There'll be trouble if he catches us."

"We are oxen, you fool," said Hira. "We can't expect heaven."

"If he lays a hand on me, I'll toss him."

"You know oxen aren't supposed to be violent," warned Hira.

They pulled up and were taken to the cow pen and securely tied to a post.

Silently they watched the boy bring dry grass for their night feed, and looked at each other, neither having the stomach to eat. A little later they saw a young girl slip into the cow pen. She gave a *chappati* each to both, and quickly slipped out. They devoured it and felt their hunger palliated. The girl had a step-mother who beat her, and she felt sympathy for the ill-treated oxen.

"This is the last straw, Hira," Moti said one day. "I won't stand it any more."

"What will you do?" asked Hira.

"I don't know. Toss a few persons, I think."

"That's all you think of," replied Hira. "Tossing won't help. The little girl is his daughter. You don't want her to lose her father, do you?"

"I didn't know that," said Moti. "Well," he added after a moment's reflection, "I'll toss her mother. Wicked woman. Beats her."

The girl entered again, quickly. They looked at her, tails still, licking her hands while she stroked their faces.

"I'll set you free," she whispered eagerly. "Run off before they catch you. They hate you, they hate you."

She untied the ropes at the post, but Hira and Moti did not move.

"Let's go while the going's good," said Moti. "What's the matter with you?" he whispered to Hira.

"No point leaving her to face the music," replied his friend. "They'll suspect her."

Suddenly, the girl began to shout: "Help! help! They're off!" and ran towards the hut.

They put on speed. Gaya stood outside his hut making a hullabaloo and collecting others in order to give chase. Here's our chance, thought the two friends—a free stretch, let's go! They galloped away with such a flourish that they were soon off the right track. New villages, new hedges, new roads accosted them. They kept running until they came to a green field.

"We've lost our way," said Hira.

"The way you ran, you're lucky you didn't reach Ahmedabad," said Moti, adding, "We should have tossed a few."

The field had a pea patch; driven by hunger, and tired, they lost themselves in crunchy, juicy peas, cocking an ear now and then in anticipation of trouble.

Moti, resting for a moment, saw from the corner of his eye a black, blurred shape coming towards them. A bull! The shape came nearer—a magnificent creature, almost an elephant's size.

"We're in trouble," he said to Hira. "What shall we do?"

"He won't listen to pleading," replied Hira. "Seems too proud."

"Let's get away."

"We could tackle him together," replied Hira. "Give him a poke from the back when he attacks me, I'll do the same when he chases you. Go for his belly. It's risky, but it's worth it."

The bull appeared to be totally unaware of this united front. He charged at Hira, Moti dashed in from the back, slashing him with a quick head movement. He turned and received similar treatment from Hira. Bewildered, panting, he made off, Hira and Moti giving hot chase. A few minutes later, he collapsed, and crumpled in a heap on the ground.

Moti then lumbered into the pea patch again in spite of warnings

from Hira. He had hardly entered it when a bunch of villagers, brandishing *lathis*, surrounded them. Hira, on the edge slipped out, but Moti was caught like a rat. Hira saw his friend, and said to himself, "Can't let him down now," and walked back into captivity.

The villagers dragged both into the Pen for Stray Cattle.

For the first time in their lives they experienced starvation. The day passed without a single straw or drop of water being offered to them; they wondered at the cruelty of their new master. Gaya was better, at least, than this. Torpidly asprawl, a few bullocks, some goats, horses and cows, killed time, like listless ghosts. A few were so weak they could hardly stand up, they stared vacantly at the gates. So did Hira and Moti; after a while they rose and licked the hot walls.

At midnight, Moti said hoarsely, "I can't stand it, Hira!"

"Neither can I," replied Hira. "We'll get out of here yet."

"We could break the gates down," suggested Moti.

"Leave me out of it," said Hira.

"You talk too much," Moti sneered.

"I'm tired."

Moti went at the gates hammer and tongs. The gates wobbled precariously. "More!" shouted Hira. An hour later, sweating and straining, the two friends broke down part of the gates, leaving a gap large enough for the animals to file out.

The beasts stood up, and the three mares, neighing triumphantly, galloped out, followed by the dogs and goats. The bullocks swayed out, but the donkeys refused to budge.

Till midnight the donkeys argued the consolations of remaining in the pen and the dangers of running away. Moti, in the meantime, was busy nibbling at his friend's rope.

"Go away," Hira said. "Don't be a fool. This rope's too strong to snap."

"I can't," replied Moti, his eyes glistening. "We've seen good times together. We've seen hard ones too."

"They'll beat you black and blue," Hira pleaded. "You know that, don't you?"

"I'm used to beatings," Moti said.

A great anger afflicted the chowkidar and the Munshiji next morning. Moti received the beating of his life, and was tied to a rope that resembled an electric cable.

They passed a week in this fashion, without a stalk of hay or a drop of water, excepting once when, on the recommendation of a passer-by, they got a pail of muddy water. Sores broke out on their bodies, they were so exhausted that they lay placidly on their backs all the day, looking up at the lolling sun, unable to get up even to exercise their legs.

Then, one warm day, a cruel-faced, red-eyed, leathery man began bargaining furiously with Munshiji. They guessed his profession, there could be no doubt about it. They gave each other frightened glances.

"We escaped with our skins from Gaya," said Hira. "Well, this is it."

"I've heard men say God is good to everyone," said Moti. "Why isn't He good to us?"

"He doesn't care if we live or die," said Hira sadly. "It isn't such a bad thing, really, Moti," he added, laughing softly. "We'll get a chance of meeting the little girl in heaven."

"Well," said Moti noncommittally.

"It's good to know we'll be such a great help when dead," continued Hira. "Meat, skin, horns, bones and all. Not an inch wasted."

The deal over, the man took them out of the pen and placed them along with other cattle he had with him. They moved feebly, trembling in every limb, gripped by many fears. Each time they slowed down, the man thwacked a stick heavily on their necks or noses.

On the way, they noticed a large field where a number of sleek, fat cows and oxen were grazing, a peaceful sun lending soft colour to the scene.

The place was familiar! The field, the hut in the background, the trees, even the sun! They quickened their steps. This was the place from which Gaya had taken them away. There could be no mistake about it. And the well, the same well where they used to drink!

"We're home!" said Moti.

"I think so," replied Hira, muttering a small prayer.

"I'm going home," shouted Moti.

"He won't let you," warned Hira.

Moti said angrily, "I'll toss him."

"Don't. Run. Let's both run. We're going home!"

Galloping like frisky colts, making every conceivable kind of

noise, they dashed in the direction of the hut. Arriving near the courtyard, they stopped, followed hard by the scoundrel.

Jhuri, sunning himself inside, heard the commotion, and came out. He quickly clasped the two friends around their necks. They cried for joy. Hira licked Jhuri's hand.

"What does this mean?" shouted the red-eyed man, catching up with them, and holding their ropes.

"They belong to me" Jhuri said.

The man shouted, "I bought them ten minutes ago from the Munshiji."

Jhuri lost his temper.

"You stole them. They belong to me. They are sold—when I sell them. Do you buy my things without my permission?"

The red-eyed man, nonplussed, said again: "Go lodge a report in the police station."

"They belong to me," Jhuri insisted. "Why should I go to a *thana*? They came to my hut because they belong to me."

The red-eyed man tried to drag away Moti and Hira. Moti had been waiting for such a move; he lunged viciously. The man stepped back. Moti lunged again. The man fled, with Moti in pursuit. He started abusing and cursing from half a mile away. After throwing few stones at them, he desisted and left.

"Thank God you didn't kill him or something," Hira said to Moti.

"I would have if he had insisted on taking me away."

Hira laughed. "He won't come this side again."

"He'll never forget it if he does," said moti.

"You know what," said Hira. "He might try to shoot us."

"Who cares?" replied Moti. "I'm home."

"No one cares for us," added Hira. "People treat us like logs of wood."

"Because we're too simple to complain," said Moti.

Barrels of rich hay were placed in front of them, they fell to eating with gusto, watched by a circle of voluble admirers. Jhuri stood nearby.

A little later, Jhuri's wife came out of the hut, put her arms round their necks, and gave each a gentle kiss on the forehead.



## *Splashes from a Motor Car*

It's one of my usual mornings, you see, and I finish my bath and my puja, place the caste mark on my forehead, don my yellow worship clothes, slip on my wooden sandals, tuck the astrological almanac under my arm, firmly grasp the enemy-skull-cracking staff of mine that I have and sally forth to meet my host and patron; my business this time being to fix the auspicious hour of a wedding. It is all going to add up to a solid rupee for me. And a regular feast thrown in. Let me say it openly, I love eating. With the result that it's rarely that I get invited by the babus. It's not my fault, I can polish off in one sitting victuals which no babu will ever be able to do justice to, not in a whole month. In fact, I'm a great admirer of any large-hearted trader or merchant—believe me, the way they stuff you and stuff you, in no time you are atop the pinnacle of heavenly ecstasy. That's why as a rule I accept an invitation only after I'm sure of the hospitable bona fides<sup>o</sup> of my host. Sour looks sour my appetite. Why feed a man if you can't even smile when you feed him? That kind of food I've never been able to get down. You see, what I need is positive encouragement—"Shastriji, one more sweet, please, try this juicy one. . ."—and me saying, "No, sir, not right now."

Drenching rain all night; puddles in the streets everywhere in the morning. Here I am, minding my own business, thinking my own thoughts, and going my own way when this car swiftly splashes by and suddenly there are scummy drops all over my face. And my dhoti too, before I know it, is sprinkled with this muddy mess. Clothes messed up, body messed up—not to mention the trouble of cleaning and washing up later. If only I could have laid hands on the motor-walla! I'd have skinned the hide off him! But I checked myself. I couldn't possibly go to my patrons in this state, and

my home was more than a mile away. And on top of that there were these passers-by clapping their hands as if they had seen the funniest thing in the world. I've never felt so humiliated in all my life. Now what? Back home, what's the good wife going to say!

It didn't take me long to make up my mind. I picked up a dozen or so small stones and waited for the next car to come my way. I'll show him! I'm a Brahmin. What does he know of the power of a Brahmin? It couldn't have been more than ten minutes later when I saw a car approaching. The very same one. Returning from the station, very likely with the owner. I hurled a stone at it the instant it came into view. The Sahib's topee whizzed off and fell on the other side of the street. The car slowed down. I fired another one. The windscreen shattered—a glass splinter cut the Sahib's cheek—a trickle of blood—the car stopped—the Sahib got down—he shook a fist at me—"You bloody swine, I'll get you jailed for this!" I heard this, I dropped my astrological paraphernalia, I gripped the Sahib by his waist and flipped him over in the slush. I mounted him, and kept pummelling his neck with brick-like blows, leaving him dazed. By this time his wife had reached the spot. Stiletto heels, silk sari, powdered cheeks, painted lips, darkly pencilled eyebrows. She began poking me with her umbrella. I got off the Sahib's back and, wielding my staff, I said to her, "Deviji, don't meddle in the affairs of men, it's not healthy, I don't want to see you get hurt."

Seizing this chance, the Sahib warily rose and jabbed my knee with his boot. It hurt. I went wild with rage, lifted my staff and swung it at his leg. He collapsed like a felled tree. Flailing her umbrella, the Memsahib charged at me. I dexterously flipped the umbrella out of her hand. All through the driver sat aloof, watching the proceedings. Now he rushed out of the car waving a stick at me. I walloped him one, and he scuttled back. While all this was going on, a crowd of fifty-odd had gathered to watch the fun. Supine, the Sahib piped up, "Rascal, I'll see you in prison if it's the last thing I do!"

I raised my staff and was on the point of whacking him on the skull when he folded his hands and squealed, "No, no, Baba, enough! I won't inform the police. I'm sorry."

I shouted, "Say 'police' again and I'll crack your skull open. So I'll get six months in jail, but before I do, you'll get a good lesson in decent driving. Splashing everyone in sight! Who do you think

you are? Don't you look right or left, don't you care who's on the road?"

One of the spectators came up with, "*Arré* Maharaj, these motor-wallas do it on purpose and when the pedestrians get messed up they think it's great fun. It's real service you've done today, shoving some sense in his head."

I taunted the Sahib, "You heard him? You heard what the people have to say?"

The Sahib glared at the man. "Lies. All lies."

I threatened him, "Still cocky, I see. Want one more?"—and I brandished my staff.

The Sahib mumbled, "All right, Baba, it's not lies, it's the truth."

A second bystander shouted, "That's what he says now but wait till he's safe inside the car—then he'll be up to his mischief again. Inside the car they all act as if they are the Nawab's own grandsons."

Another said, "Make him lick his own spit!"

And a third: "No, make him hold his ears and do sit-ups."

A fourth: "That goes for the driver too. Rascal! Rascals all of them. Pride is all right for the rich, but who are you? Put a steering wheel in his hand and he has eyes for nothing else."

A fine idea. Driver and master doing sit-ups, and the Memsahib counting.

"Memsahib, you keep count. One hundred sit-ups. More, yes, but mind, not one less than a hundred."

Two men gripped the Sahib's arms, and two the driver's. Despite his leg injury the driver started doing sit-ups. The Sahib refused to budge. Babbling incoherently, he spread himself flat on the ground. As for me, I became adamant like Shiva himself. One hundred sit-ups or nothing. I ordered four men to push the car down the road.

And push they did—not four but fifty of them. The slope was high enough to have made a wreck of the car had it landed below, and it was beginning to roll down when the Sahib whined, "Baba, let the car be. I'll do the sit-ups."

I ordered the men to stop, but it was such a huge joke for them that they refused to listen. I rushed at them with my staff and they scattered helter-skelter. The Sahib closed his eyes and started his sit-ups.

After ten sit-ups I asked the Memsahib, "Keeping count?"

She flared up. "I won't count."

"Then let him stay here and whine the whole day for I won't let him go. You want him back home safe and sound, don't you? Start counting."

The Sahib realised what was good for him. One, two, three, four, five. . . .

Suddenly this car turns up. The Sahib sees it, rubs his nose on the ground and pleads, "You are like my father, Panditji. Have a heart and let me off this time. No more car-riding for me—I promise."

I was moved. I said, "No, I'm not stopping you from riding about in cars. But this I insist—when you sit in a car, remember those who don't ride in cars are also human beings."

This car keeps coming at a fast speed. I make a sign. Each man picks up a couple of stones. It's an owner-driven car; he slows down and wants to slip by, but I reach out and tweak both his ears and administer two resounding slaps on both his cheeks and I tell him, "I'm warning you, don't you dare splash anyone when you drive, understand! All right, you can go. Slowly!"

This new driver, he fumbles and grumbles, but then he has a good look at the hundred-odd characters surrounding him, all armed with stones, and he accelerates with his tail between his legs.

A minute later this third car comes up and I have fifty of my henchmen soon encircling it. The car stops and I give four solid slaps to the driver before letting him go. This poor fellow is a gentleman; he takes the slaps in good sport; and he drives off.

Then suddenly there is a shout. "Police! Police!"

And in one instant there is no one left in the street. As for me, I descend the slope and slip away inconspicuously and disappear in a side lane.

## *Miss Padma*

Having done brilliantly in her Law examinations, Miss Padma experienced an eerie feeling of aloneness, a feeling very new to her. Marriage she considered an artificial bondage, and she had determined to live her life in the free pursuit of pleasure. After her M.A., she had passed her LL.B., and begun practice. She was young, glamorous, vivacious, sweet-spoken; she had personality. She anticipated no obstacles in life. In no time at all she out-achieved her male colleagues in the law courts; her earnings exceeded a thousand rupees a month. She had no need now to overwork her body and her brain—the cases were all pretty much the same—she had the legal ins and outs at her fingertips—no elaborate preparation of briefs was ever required. She had full confidence in herself. She was conversant with all the tricks of the legal trade, specially the art of winning a case. With the result that she had plenty of leisure which she spent in reading, going out, enjoying movies, and socializing.

She believed that to be happy in life one had to have some passionate involvement or other. So she took up gardening, and devoted her time to planting seeds, and watching them sprout into leaves and flowers, and this certainly made her happy but it did not fill the lonely vacuum in her heart. It's not that she disliked the male of the species. Far from it; in fact, she had any number of admirers. Her beauty and youth were more than sufficient to inspire many ardent hangers-on; besides she had the other eminently plus distinction of wealth in her favour. Why should she ever lack connoisseurs of feminine beauty? Padma had nothing against the pleasures of love, but she was against the subjugation of women, and she loathed the debasement of marriage into a business. She felt it was infinitely better to remain single and enjoy

the delights of an unencumbered existence. She had no moral compunction about sexual indulgence; to her it was merely a hunger of the body. Sex needed satisfaction, and it could easily be satisfied in a clean place as well. She was always on the lookout for such a clean place. Every customer has a special taste, and she was no exception. Among her dozens of admirers were lawyers, professors and artistocrats. But they were all voluptuaries—irresponsible bees, fickle seekers of honey. There was not one among them she could trust. And she slowly realized that sexual pleasure was not what she was after, but something else. But what? A love based on total self-surrender, and that was really nowhere to be found.

In love with her was a certain Mr Prasad—handsome and tremendously learned. He lectured in a college, he had liberal views, and Padma was deeply attracted to him. She wanted him all for herself, absolutely for herself, but Prasad was not one of the easy victim types.

One evening Padma was about to take a stroll when Prasad dropped in. She forgot about the stroll. Talking to him was a far greater pleasure; besides, she had something personal to say to him today. She had mulled over it for many days and finally decided to take the plunge.

She looked into his fervent eyes and said, "Why don't you come over and stay here with me, in my bungalow?"

Prasad replied with mock-seriousness, "Don't you realize two months of living together will spoil the relationship we have now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I say."

"But why?"

"I don't want to lose my freedom, and you don't want to lose yours. When your admirers visit you here, do you think I'm going to like it? When my girl friends turn up, do you think you're going to like it? It will be the same old story—first friction, then bitterness, then the split, and before I know what's happened I'm kicked out. It's your house after all. How do you expect this friendship to continue after all that?"

Both were silent for a full minute. Prasad had clarified the situation so succinctly that there was nothing left to say.

It was Prasad who found the way out. "Until you promise of your own free will that you are mine and I promise of my own free

will that I am yours, this will never get settled."

"And will you promise?"

"Will you?"

"Yes."

"All right, I will too."

"One condition though—this promise apart, I am completely free to do as I like."

"Agreed. This promise apart, I too am free to do as I like."

"Done."

"Done."

"When do we start?"

"You name the day."

"The sooner the better—tomorrow."

"Fine. But if you break your word—"

"Leave me and go—what else?"

"And if you break yours?"

"Then throw me out of the house. But how do I punish *you*?"

"Oh no, that's no punishment. What you deserve is humiliation and death."

"You are a heartless one, Prasad."

"We have no rights on each other so long as we are free. But once you make a promise, I'll never be able to endure your breaking it. You can punish me by showing me the door, but what can *I* do? I have no law on my side. Brute force, that's what I'll have to use. And I warn you, not all your servants will be able to save you then."

"You see only the darker side of the picture. Incurable pessimist! If I promise myself to you, this house, these servants, this land are all yours. You and I know very well there's no sin so terrible as jealousy. I don't know if you love me or not, but for you I will suffer everything, I will give everything."

"You mean it, Padma?"

"With all my heart, Prasad."

"In my heart of hearts I just can't believe you mean what you are saying."

"But I do believe every word *you* say."

"But get this clear—I'm not a guest in your house, I'm going to live here as the master of the house."

"Not just the master of the house, but the master of my heart, my lord and master, my husband. And I will be your devoted wife."

Professor Prasad and Miss Padma seem to be perfectly happy living together. Their mutual pledge has satisfactorily actualised. Prasad's monthly salary is just two hundred rupees, but he has no qualms over spending twice that. Previously he used to take a drop now and then, but these days he is in a state of permanent inebriation. He has his own car, his own retinue of servants, he is always ordering expensive artifacts, and Padma puts up with all this ultra-extravagance. Puts up is hardly the word; she enjoys buying him the finest suits and pampering him with the absurdest luxuries. The richest trader in town cannot afford the watch Professor Prasad sports on his wrist. The more she gives in, the more he exploits her. There are times when she feels disgusted, but he has an inexplicable hold over her. His pettiest moods make her disproportionately restless. He orders her around, and keeps taunting her. Her past admirers devise ways of harassing and embarrassing her, but the presence of Prasad makes her oblivious to all these irritations. Prasad has established absolute hegemony over her, and she knows it. He has analysed her through and through, and taken over.

Excessive authority corrupts as much in the sphere of love as it does in politics. The weaker of the two is doomed to suffer. Self-confident Padma had allowed herself to become a slave, and why should anyone blame Prasad for taking advantage of her weakness. He kept needling her and hammering the painful point in more and more. He made it a habit to come home late. He stopped taking her out with him on the slightest pretext, such as a headache; and whenever Padma went for a stroll by herself he would take the car out and disappear. Two years passed; Padma became pregnant and fat and lost much of her youthful freshness and charm; a domesticated hen, a flabby vegetable.

One day Padma returned from her regular stroll and found Prasad missing as usual. Something snapped in her. For quite a few days she had been noticing a change coming over Prasad. She decided it was time she give him a piece of her mind. Ten o'clock; eleven; she waited. Dinner turned cold, the servants went to bed. Every now and then she would get up and stare at the gate. It was well past midnight when Prasad returned.

All her courage seemed to melt and her knees almost gave way when she faced him. She plucked up what little strength she had



left and said, "Where were you all this time? Can't you see how late it is?"

At that moment she appeared to Prasad to be the very embodiment of unattractiveness. He had gone to a cinema with one of his girl students. "You should be in bed," he said, "resting. Don't you have the sense to realise that in your condition you need all the rest you can get?"

Padma's courage revived. "I asked you a question; why don't you answer me? You've made life hell for me."

"No worse than the hell you've made it for me."

"You are not the same man I knew."

"You are a late learner, aren't you?"

"I can see it clearly—you are double-crossing me."

"What do you think, you've bought me off? If you've had enough of me, fine, let's separate and go our ways."

"Don't you dare threaten me! You sacrificed nothing by coming here."

"Don't you lecture me on sacrifice. What do you know of sacrifice? What gives you the right to be so high and moral? I can see what's wrong—you can't think straight anymore. So I'm a helpless creature in your hands, am I? I know what you think. But remember, I can call off the whole thing if I want to, right now. And I will!"

Her courage ebbed. Prasad had begun packing his trunk. She said humbly, "Now what have I done? What did I say to make you lose your head like this. All I wanted to know was what took you so long? Don't I have even that small a right? Have you ever seen me do anything against your wishes? And all you ever do is scold me black and blue. Don't you have *any* feeling for me? Can't I expect any sympathy from you? Is there anything in the world I won't do for you? And now, in my condition you don't even look at me, you look the other way. . . ."

She choked and, placing her head on the table, broke into loud sobs.

It was Prasad's day of triumph.

Motherhood appeared a distasteful prospect to Padma. One fear obsessed her, so much so as to make her tremble and bitterly regret the past. Prasad's behaviour became more and more self-willed and

selfish. She was on the horns of a dilemma. She was expecting her baby any day, and had stopped going to court. She would sit all day, alone, doing nothing. Prasad would return briefly in the evening, finish his tea, and disappear until late night. His intentions and whereabouts were no secret. It was almost as if he loathed the very sight of her. Advanced pregnancy: sallow complexion, constant worry, sense of sorrow and fear. But this did not prevent Padma from trying her best to attract Prasad with the totality of feminine adornments, with all the *sringara* that she could muster. But her efforts had exactly the reverse effect: they created in Prasad's mind an even greater antipathy to her. With the result that even the exquisite seductions of *sringara* began to displease him.

Prasad was nowhere around when she went into labour. True, the nurse was present, and the lady doctor, but his absence made Padma more intensely aware of her pain.

Her heart filled with joy seeing her son but, not seeing Prasad nearby, she looked away. Her sweet fruit seemed suddenly to have turned sour.

After her ritual post-birth five days' isolation Padma felt as if released from prison—she felt like a finely tempered sword. The experience of motherhood aroused in her an extraordinary strength.

She sent the *chaprasi* to the bank to cash a cheque to pay the sundry confinement expenses. He returned empty-handed.

Padma asked, "Where's the money?"

"The bank babu said Prasad babu has withdrawn all the money."

Padma almost collapsed. Twenty thousand rupees of hard earned money, which she had saved for this little boy—all gone—it couldn't be! Later she discovered that Prasad had gone off on a pleasure trip to England with one of the college girls. She stormed back home, flung Prasad's photograph on the floor and stamped on it. She heaped up all his belongings, spat on them, and set fire to them.

A month passed. Padma was standing by her bungalow gate with her baby son in her arms. Her anger had subsided into a grief-stricken hopelessness. Her feelings for the infant alternated between pity, and love, and loathing. She saw a European couple going out for a stroll with their baby in a perambulator. She looked at the happy husband and wife with poignant longing; suddenly her eyes brimmed with tears.

# *The Fine*

## I

Not a month passed without a fine being sliced out of Alarakhi's wages. Her six rupees invariably became five, but one way or other she managed to escape the clutches of the Inspector of Sanitation, Khairat Ali Khan. Khan Sahib's dependents included a regular army of sweeper-women. No one else had wages cut, no one else was fined, no one else got scolded. Khan Sahib was known for his kindness, a kindness whose orbit clearly did not include Alarakhi. She was no work-shirker, nor ill-mannered, nor stupid, and certainly not ugly. On the coldest night she would be out in the streets with her broom sweeping away with unremitting assiduity.

But as for the fine—there was never any relief from *that*.

Her husband Husaini would help her out at times, but it was written in her kismet that a fine would always be, and a fine there always was. Others rejoiced on payday; she, as if dangling from a hook, bemoaned her fate, never knowing what the amount of the fine would be. Like candidates at an examination guessing questions, she was always worrying about the amount.

It so happened that one day, tired out, she paused for a small rest. And, as chance would have it, the Inspector drove by in his buggy. She pleaded, "Huzoor, I'll make up, give me a chance," but he turned a deaf ear, and not only that but jotted her down in his note-book.

A few days later, the same story. She was enjoying a paisa worth of *sevra* in a sweet shop when the Inspector again, seemingly out of nowhere, pounced on her and she was again blackmarked in his note-book. The least respite she took, and there he was, like an

ubiquitous ghost. . . .

Only two black marks against her name, but so many fines. May Allah the all-merciful at least this time grant that her eight anna fine didn't become a rupee! When, head bowed, humbly she went to collect her wages, she found the fine always more than she had anticipated. With tears in her eyes she would return with whatever she got. Who could she complain to, who would take her word against the Inspector's?

Payday again. Her baby girl, who was still suckling, had developed a cough and a fever. It was bitter cold. Partly the cold and partly the baby's wails made sleep impossible. Some days she had failed to go to work on time and, of course, the Inspector had promptly blackmarked her. Half her wages were sure to be deducted this time. She'd consider herself lucky indeed if she got the remaining half. There was no way of knowing how much he was going to cut. She went to work, carrying the baby on her hip, and armed with her broom. The little wretch refused to leave her lap, in spite of all the threats of the Inspector she showered on the girl—"He'll come and get you!" "He'll beat your mother up!" "He'll cut your nose and your mother's nose too!" The girl was agreeable to having her nose and ear chopped but not agreeable to leaving her mother's lap. But when all her threats and moues and cajolings and endearments and pouting kisses failed to have any effect, Alarakhi lifted the child from her lap and deposited her, screaming and crying, in a corner and went about her business of sweeping; but the scamp of a girl refused to stay put in one place and insisted on following her mother around, and tugging at her sari and clutching at her legs and sprawling on the ground and, the next instant, squatting and howling.

Brandishing her broom she said, "Shut up, or I'll whack you one with this! The beard-walla Inspector will come and get you. . . ."

The words had hardly slipped out of her mouth when she saw Inspector Khairat Ali Khan alighting from his cycle. Alarakhi paled and her heart went *dhuk-dhuk*. *Ye Allah! I hope he didn't hear me! A curse on my eyes for not seeing him! How could I have missed him? How was I to know he would turn up on his cycle? He always comes in his buggy.* The blood stopped coursing in her veins. Broom in hand, she stood there petrified.

The Inspector admonished her, "Is this any way to work, with the baby tailing you wherever you go? Why can't you leave her at

home?"

Alarakhi replied timidly, "She's not well, huzoor, who'll look after her at home?"

"What's wrong with her?"

"She has fever, huzoor."

"And you let her run wild like this, screaming and bawling? Have you no sense? You want to kill her?"

"How can I carry her in my lap and work at the same time?"

"So why don't you take leave?"

"It's the fine, huzoor. I have to work. I have to live somehow."

"Pick her up and take her home. When Husaini returns tell him to come and sweep this place."

Alarakhi was about to leave with the girl when the Inspector asked, "What are all those dirty things you were saying about me?"

Alarakhi could have died. Her blood froze. Trembling she said, "Huzoor, I never said anything. Curse me if I did."

And she broke down in uncontrollable tears.

2

Husaini and a dejected-looking Alarakhi both went to collect their wages in the evening.

Husaini tried consoling her. "What's the matter with you? So what if he fines you. I swear on your life, I won't touch a drop of wine or toddy from today."

"I'm afraid. I know he'll fine me. This cursed tongue that I have—I say things. . . ."

"So let him fine you if he wants to. And may Allah be merciful to him! How long can we carry on fawning and whining?"

"What's the use crying, we can't do a thing. They'll all laugh at us."

"On what charge will he fine you? Don't I have the right to ask? Who heard you insult him, where's the witness? Who does he think he is, he can dismiss anyone he likes, what injustice is this! If he won't hear me out, I'll take it to the *panchayat*. I'll take it right to the village headman's door!"

"If we villagers were united, you think he would dare fine us?"

"Sweet little idiot, you know nothing—the worse the disease, the

stronger the medicine."

His words were no help; gloom still overpowered Alarakhi. Why did the Inspector not react more, why did he not dismiss her on the spot? It didn't make sense. Could it be that he was a little kind, after all? It was all so mysterious, and it was the mystery that baffled and bothered her, and even made her fear the worst. If he wanted simply to fine her, he'd have jotted her name down in the book. He must have made up his mind to fire her so he could well afford to be sweet and pleasant. She had heard that before hanging a convict, they stuffed him with *puries*, and sweets, and even let him meet anyone he liked. *Yes, no doubt of it, I'm fired.*

She reached the office of the municipality. Hundreds of sweeper-women in assorted multicoloured dresses and make-up. And a motley variety of hawkers of *pan* and cigarettes and odds and ends. Also a bunch of Pathans hanging about extorting money from defaulting borrowers. Husband and wife stood in line.

First in the queue of wage payments were the sweeper-women. As each name was called out, the woman would hurry forward, collect her wages and invoke copious blessings on the Inspector. Normally Alarakhi's turn came after Champa's. But not today; today, after Champa, Jahuran, who normally came after Alarakhi, was given priority.

Alarakhi looked at Husaini with eyes dulled with a dead hope. The other women started whispering among themselves. She wished she was back home. The humiliation was unbearable. She wished the earth would open and she go under.

One by one they passed in a procession, the names, and Alarakhi kept staring blankly at the trees in front of her. Suddenly it didn't matter anymore who came and who went, who got paid and who didn't, who stared at her, who smirked.

And then she heard her name with a start. She rose slowly and, like a young bride, she nervously stepped forward. The accountant placed her full wages, six rupees, in her hand.

She stared, bewildered, at him. Had he made a mistake? Never in the last three years had she received her full wages. And she'd have been more than happy to receive even half this time. Nonplussed she stood there, half expecting the accountant to ask the money back. When the accountant asked, "What are you gaping at me for?" she replied timidly, "But this is my entire wages."

Surprised, the accountant looked at her, "Why, you want less?"

"No fine?"

"Not this time."

Alarakhi left, feeling very uneasy. She thought: *I shouldn't have said what I said about the Inspector.*

# The Thakur's Well

## I

As Jokhu lifted the *lota* to his lips, a foul stench assailed his nostrils. He asked Gangi, "What kind of water is this? It stinks. It's not drinkable. I'm parched, and all you can give is this awful, smelly water!"

Gangi fetched the water every evening; the well was at some distance. Yesterday the water was smell-free; where did today's stench come from? She sniffed the *lota*; yes, it did smell. Some animal must have drowned in the well; it couldn't be anything else. But where could she get an alternative supply of water?

Who'd let her draw water from the Thakur's well? They'd drive her off before she came within a mile of it. The moneylender's well was still further off, and she'd never be allowed there, either. The village itself had no well.

Jokhu has been ill for many days. He suppressed his thirst and lay quiet for a while. Then he said, "I can't. Not any more. Let me have that *lota*. I'll hold my nose and take a sip."

Gangi did not oblige him. Stinking water could only worsen his condition—she knew that much, at least. What she did not know was that boiling would disinfect any water, stale or noisome. She said, "How can you even think of drinking this? Who knows what dead animal's lying in the bottom of the well? I'll get you fresh water from elsewhere."

Surprised, Jokhu looked at her. "Where will you get it?"

"There's the Thakur and the moneylender. They have their own wells. They won't deny me one *lota* of water."

"They'll beat you black and blue, that's what they'll do. Sit down! The holy Brahmins give you blessings, the Thakur hits you



with a lathi, and the moneylender skins you of your cash. Who feels for us suffering poor? Even when we die, does anyone come to our doors?—Let alone taking the death-cot to the funeral pyre! And you think they'll let you draw water from their well?"

## 2

Nine o'clock at night. The tired workers are all fast asleep; a handful of carefree stragglers are lounging near the Thakur's house. This is not the age of face-to-face bravery—nor is there occasion for it. What they are discussing is the other kind—legal valour. It was quite a trick—the Thakur had cleverly bribed the officer in charge of the police station and got himself a clean bill of health. With what intellectual dexterity he had once fished out a copy of the files of a case! The bailiffs and court-scribes were adamant that there was no way of laying hands on the files. Some wanted fifty rupees, others a hundred. And here he had done it without spending so much as one paisa! There was always a way of getting things done.

Right then Gangi turned up.

In her hand was a small oil lamp, whose faint glow lit her path. She sat behind the platform around the well, biding her time. All the villagers drew water from this well. No one was forbidden to do so; but for her it's taboo.

Gangi's heart chafed and rebelled at these petty social restraints and compulsions. *Why are we low born, and they high? Just because they wear a sacred thread? Such glorious specimens of manhood here, each one up on the other—one's a crook, one's a swindler, one files false cases. . . . Only the other day the Thakur stole a sheep from one of the village farms and gorged on a sumptuous repast of mutton. These are the very same pundits who gamble twelve months in the year. These are the traders and shopkeepers who adulterate ghee with cheap vegetable oil. They get their own work done, but when it comes to paying wages, they raise such a stink! What makes them so high and special then? They keep shouting "We're special!"—that's all. And we don't—that's all. Whenever I come to the village, all I get from them is lewd stares. There's a snake slithering in each of their hearts, but the pride with which they pretend they're special!*

Sound of approaching footsteps. Gangi's heart began pounding

hard. *She mustn't be seen! They'd kick her out first thing!* She picked up the water-pot and the rope and slipped away to the dark refuge of a tree. *When will these people ever show the littlest kindness? The way they beat up Mahangu—he vomited blood, poor man, for months after that. Simply because he refused to work for free. And the airs they put on after all these atrocities!*

Two women come to the well to take water, and start gossiping.

"Here I am about to begin my meal when the order comes: Get fresh water! We don't have money to get a large water jar, you see."

"They can't bear the sight of us sitting still. That's how husbands are."

"Yes, you don't have to tell me. He doesn't go and fetch water himself. He orders me, 'Go get water', as if I'm his slave or something."

"What else are you? Don't you depend on him for food and clothes? And surely you know how to wheedle five or ten rupees out of him now and then, don't you? That's the way all slaves are."

"Sister, don't shame me any more. I don't get a second's rest all day. If I worked as hard in any other house as I do in my own, I'd be much better looked after. And they'd feel obliged too! I work myself to the bones here, and I don't even get so much as a straight look and a kind word."

Filling their water pots, both left; Gangi came out of the dark under the tree and sat down beside the well platform. The loungers and stragglers had departed. The Thakur had shut his front door and had gone in to sleep in the courtyard. Gangi breathed a little freer. No one to stop her. No prince of the ancient past on a mission of nectar-stealing from the gods ever crept so stealthily and cautiously as Gangi now. She climbed up the platform with muffled steps, experiencing a sense of never-before-felt, exultant victory.

She tied the rope round the pot. Like a sepoy peering fearfully through a tunnel he's dug inside an enemy fortification, Gangi looked around her apprehensively. If caught, there would be no way out for her, not a shred of hope. With a silent prayer to the gods, she steeled her heart and lowered the pot in the well.

The pot splashed softly, almost inaudibly. She pulled up the rope swiftly until the pot touched the rim of the well. No professional strongman could have pulled faster.

As Gangi bent to retrieve the pot, the Thakur's door was sud-

denly flung open, more frightening than a tiger's wide-open mouth.

The rope slipped from her hands. The pot dropped in the well with a loud splash; the echoes from the ripples reverberated up for many seconds.

Shouting "Who's there? Who's there?" the Thakur rushed in the direction of the well. Gangi leapt off the platform and ran for her life.

Reaching home, she saw Jokhu drinking the smelly water.

## Cowards

### 1

He was Keshav, she Prema. Both college students, in the same class. Keshav had liberal views; he was strongly anti-caste. Prema however believed implicitly in the *sanskaras*, in the entire nexus of tradition and ritual, of rule and usage. Despite this, love blossomed between the two; in fact, they were the talk of the college. Keshav was a Brahmin but he had made up his mind to fulfil his life by marrying this Vaishya girl. He was prepared to defy his parents if it came to that. All these social mores seemed to him just a mockery. The only truth that mattered was Prema; but Prema's truth revolved around father and mother and family and community and society.

Evening. They were sitting in Victoria Park, surrounded by greenery. The strollers had left one by one, but they continued to sit by themselves, as if they could carry on talking for ever.

Keshav said testily, "You mean to say you don't care for me at all."

Prema tried to calm him with "You know that's not fair, Keshav. But how do you expect me to tell father and mother? Do be reasonable. You know how much they believe in our old ways. Do you realise how upset they will be if I tell them everything?"

Keshav retorted angrily, "Are you trying to tell me that you believe in the old ways too?"

Prema's large eyes brimmed with gentle affection. "No, I'm not a rubber-stamp, if that's what you mean, but I just cannot go against the wishes of my parents."

"You mean you have no life of your own?"

"If you want to put it that way."

"I always thought all this ritual rigmarole was for idiots—how was I to know a bluestocking like you is full of puja for outdated rituals? Here I am ready to give up the whole world for your sake, so why shouldn't I expect you to do the same for me?"

Prema thought, *I have no rights over my body. How can I ever go against the wishes of my own parents, who gave me birth and nourished me with their blood and lavished their affection on me! No, I cannot.*

She said to Keshav with humility, "Why should anything physical enter into our relationship, Keshav? Can't we just be good friends? If you ask me, love is a union of two souls."

Keshav flared up. "You'll drive me crazy with your philosophical flights, Prema. Stop it. Just remember, I can't live without you. I'm a plain pragmatist and I'm sorry I don't find much sense in your fanciful world of speculations."

Saying this he caught Prema's hand and gently pulled her towards him. Slipping her hand free, she said, "No, Keshav, I've told you I'm not free. Don't ask me for what's not in my power to give."

Had she been harsh with him, he would not have minded so much. He sat there dejected; then, forlornly saying, "You know best," he slowly got up and left.

Prema stayed back; there were tears in her eyes.

## 2

Prema finished her dinner and lay down beside her mother; but sleep refused to come. The words of Keshav flickered in her consciousness like shadows in fickle water, their meaning altering every second. She did not know what to make of them. And how could she tell her mother? Embarrassment prevented her. She thought: *If I can't marry Keshav, what have I left to live for? But what right have I?* And so she kept worrying in this manner, sure only of one thing, that if she couldn't marry Keshav she would marry no one else.

Her mother asked, "Still sleepless! How many times I've told you—learn to do something in the house! But with you it's books, books, books all the time. . . . Don't you realise you'll have to get married soon? What will your in-laws think? If you can't do even the simplest chores, how will you ever manage?"

Prema said naively, "Why do I have to get married at all?"

Her mother smiled. "Because you're a girl, that's why. It's all right when they are young, but girls belong to others when they grow up, don't you know that? If you get a good man, you are lucky, you'll be happy, and if you don't then it's a long sad life for you. It's all karma, that's what it is. I don't see any suitable young man in our community. And some families don't even know how to treat a girl properly. But marry you must, and in the community too. God knows when these caste divisions will go."

Prema said, "There have been cases of marriages outside the community."

She said this casually but she was really afraid that her mother would get all steamed up.

Surprised, her mother asked, "You mean, among Hindus?" And she answered her own question, "Yes, I know, one or two stray cases. . . . They don't mean a thing."

Prema kept silent, fearful that her mother might have guessed her intention. Her future loomed before her like a gaping abyss about to swallow her up.

She had no idea when she fell asleep.

### 3

Next morning Prema woke up with a fresh courage. Most major decisions tend to be made on the spur of the moment, with some fortuitous help or other; and this is what happened with Prema. Till yesterday she had considered the word of her parents as final. But now she dared to be a determined wind challenging the mountain of her crisis. Even the feeblest wind if it persists can succeed in ascending the mountain to the peak and cross over to the safety of the other side.

She thought: *Granted, my parents gave me this body, and they have rights on it—but after all my feelings are my own even though they come to me through my body.* She felt that to keep silent any more was more than just being improper, it was ruinous. *I will not sacrifice my life at the altar of hypocrisy! Without love what is marriage but sale of the body? Is unconditional surrender of one's self ever possible without love?* Her heart rebelled at the very thought of having to marry a complete stranger.

She had finished breakfast and was settling down to study when her father lovingly called her. "I went and met your principal

yesterday. He has the highest praise for you."

Prema said, "You always say the same thing, father."

"No, I mean it."

As he said this he pulled out the drawer of his table and showed her a velvet-framed photograph. "This young man has stood first in the I.C.S. You know who he is, don't you?"

Her father broached the subject in such a way that she might have easily missed his drift. But, straight as an arrow, she sensed what he was up to.

Without glancing at the photograph she said, "No, I know nothing about him."

Her father exclaimed in mock-surprise, "What! You don't even know his name? Today's paper has his photograph and all details about him."

Prema said coldly, "So what? I don't see the point of sitting for this kind of exam. I know this much—all these I.C.S. exam-sitters are first-rate self-seekers. After all, what do they do—they exploit their poor, oppressed, and unfortunate fellowmen and make a tidy pile for themselves. Don't tell me this is the highest ideal of life."

A hard, bitter, burning protest. Her father had somehow got the idea that his words would profoundly impress her. Her reaction made him retort sharply, "What kind of rubbish is this! You talk as if you have no sense of others' rights, as if money means nothing in this world."

Prema said impudently, "Yes, it's true, I don't care for these things. All I look for is selflessness. I know of boys who can't be selfless even if you stuff selflessness inside them—they don't even know what it is."

Her father said sarcastically, "That's news to me! In my experience, there are always hundreds of people clamouring for even the pettiest of jobs. Wouldn't I like to see that marvellous young man of your acquaintance who has such a splendid spirit of selflessness! Show him to me and I'll fall at his feet and offer him puja."

The same words on any other occasion would have made Prema blush and look down, but this time she felt like a soldier with no choice but to march ahead because behind him is a yawning ditch. She checked her anger but, eyes flashing rebelliously, she strode straight to her room; from the many photographs of Keshav that she had she selected the absolutely worst-looking and thrust it in front of her father. He glanced indifferently at it; nevertheless it

exercised an irresistible magnetism. The figure in the photograph was tall and slim; it hinted at a man with discipline, health and personality; it made an immediate impact. There was no extraordinary mark of genius on the face, but the impression of gentle thoughtfulness was unmistakable and it produced a feeling of trust in the beholder.

Looking at the photograph, he asked, "Who is this?"

Shyly Prema lowered her head and said, "He is in my class."

"What caste?"

Prema's face fell. Her fate hung on the answer to that question. Suddenly she felt how foolish it had been of her to display the photograph. The courage that had briefly inspired her, now deserted her; this pointed question made her again faint-hearted. She said weakly, "He is not our caste, he is a Brahmin." Upset, she left the room; the atmosphere was suffocating; she clung to the wall and sobbed.

Her father's first reaction was of fury: he wanted to call her back and tell her in no uncertain terms that what she had in mind was impossible. He marched up to her but, seeing her sobbing, he softened.

It was easy enough for him to guess what feelings Prema had for this young man. He believed in women getting educated but he believed even more strongly in upholding family traditions. He was prepared to sacrifice everything to get a suitable bridegroom from his own caste but he could not even conceive of anyone, no matter how well born, no matter how matrimonially worthy, who would be acceptable if not of his caste. Such an insufferable union would indeed be the crowning insult.

He said harshly, "You are not going to college from today! I don't call that education that teaches you to go against family principles."

Prema said timidly, "But the examinations are drawing near."

He said firmly, "Let them!"

He went back to his room, still very worried.

4

Six months passed.

Lalaji said to his wife in private, "From what I gather, Keshav is a fine standing young man with a personality. Look at the



way Prema's been crying her life away. You've tried and I've tried and everyone else has tried—all in vain. I suggest we let them marry."

His wife replied worriedly, "All right! all right! But why can't we have any say? How did such a hag ever come out of my womb?"

Lalaji knotted his eyebrows and expostulated, "How many times are you going to harp on this! There's a limit to family respectability. First you train a bird to fly and then you expect it to hop around sweetly in the custody of your courtyard. It's stupid! I've thought it over coolly and I've made up my mind—we have a crisis on our hands and that's the way we'll have to deal with it. I'm not going to destroy my daughter's life over family respectability. If they want to mock us, let them mock. But the time is not far off when all these foolish fetters will have no meaning. Why, even these days there are hundreds of inter-caste marriages going on all the time. If marriage means a happy life for a man and a woman, then we'll have to consider Prema's case with sympathy."

She retorted angrily, "If that's the way you feel, why ask me? But I tell you once and for all that if this marriage takes place, don't expect me to be a party to it, for I refuse to see the face of this cheeky daughter of yours any more. I've lost sons before and I'll add one dead daughter to the list."

"What are you driving at?"

"Why not marry her off to the boy we chose for her? What's wrong with him? In two years he will have passed the Civil Service. What's Keshav got to show? He'll be no better than a petty office clerk all his life."

"And if our daughter commits suicide, have you thought of that?"

"So let her—you are the one that's encouraging her. She doesn't care for us; all we are getting is a stigma on our family name. What do you think suicide is—a game or something? It's all a bluff. The mind's like a horse; if you can't rein it, don't excite it. If she is so indisciplined now, how do you expect her to spend a whole lifetime with Keshav in peace? She loves him today, what's to prevent her from loving someone else tomorrow? What's come over you? You can't compromise on principle."

Lalaji looked inquiringly at his wife. "Suppose she goes and marries Keshav tomorrow, can you stop her? What about your exalted honour then? She might out of fear or regard for us decide

not to go ahead with it, but if she is stubborn, then there is precious little we can do about it."

Lalaji's wife could never conceive of such a horrendous eventuality taking place in her home. The thought hit her like a bombshell. She sat completely stunned, as if some calamity had shot her mind to pieces. Then, recovering, she said, "What weird ideas you have! I haven't yet heard of any decent dignified girl choosing her own husband."

"You haven't but I have. Not only heard but seen it too. It isn't as impossible as you think."

"Well, that may be, but the day it happens in my home you won't see me alive."

"I'm not saying it's going to happen in our home, I'm only saying that it's been known to happen."

"If that's what's going to happen, then let's start making arrangements. If we are going to be ashamed, let's be well and thoroughly ashamed. Invite Keshav tomorrow, let's hear what he has to say about this."

5

Keshav's father subsisted on a Government pension. He was a thrifty, touchy man, who found life's peace only in the pomp and pageantry of ritual dharma. He suffered from a conspicuous lack of imagination and had very little respect for others' views. He huddled in the constricted world of his childhood days, and considered the advancing waves of new ideas to be a menace which had to be fought tooth and nail and prevented from defiling the sanctity of his threshold. And that was why when Prema's father went and met him to broach the marriage proposal, Panditji lost his head. His weak eyes flared up and he said, "Have you had bhang or what? They can do what they like but marriage is out of the question. It seems you've been infected with these new-fangled ideas too."

Prema's father replied gently, "I too am against this kind of marriage. My views are one with yours in this matter. But what can I do, my hands are tied, that's why I have to come to you. You know how self-willed and selfish boys and girls are these days. You know how difficult a time we old people have keeping our principles alive. All that I'm afraid of is that these two might go and do some-

thing desperate.”

Panditji stamped his foot on the ground and said, “The things you say, Sir! Be ashamed. We are Brahmins, don’t you know that, and high class Kulin Brahmins too. We may have fallen, but we haven’t been so disgraced that we will go and get our sons married to the daughters of low class *banias* and brokers. We still have daughters to choose from in our own caste, thank you. What I want to know is how did you ever get the gumption to come here?”

The more Prema’s father gave in, the more Panditji shouted. So much so that he could tolerate it no further and left in a huff, cursing his fate.

Keshav happened to return from college just then. Panditji called him and said bitterly, “What’s this I hear, you’ve gone and married a *bania* girl.”

Feigning ignorance, Keshav replied, “Who told you this?”

“What does that matter? What I want to know is, is it true or not? If it’s true and you want to disgrace the family then I tell you straight, there is no place in this house for you. And I’m not going to leave a single paisa for you if you do that. What I have, is what I’ve earned on my own. I have every right to bequeath it to whoever I wish. After such shameful behaviour, how can you expect to live in my house?”

Keshav knew his father only too well. He loved Prema certainly, and wanted to marry her in secret. His father wasn’t going to live for ever. He knew his mother was not likely to object. He was prepared to suffer and overcome any indignities for the sake of his love. But he was like a soldier getting cold feet on the battlefield. He was like any average young man fiercely idealistic in theory, but not prepared to work constructively to implement the idealism. If he remained obdurate, and if his father did not budge either, where would it all end, what would happen to him? His life would be a shambles.

He said timidly, “Whoever has been spreading this report is a liar.”

Panditji looked piercingly at him. “It’s all absolutely false, is it?”

“Yes, Sir, absolutely.”

“Then do this right away—write a letter to the *bania* explaining your position, and remember, if anything like this ever happens again then the worst enemy you will ever get in life will be me. You

can go now."

There was nothing left for Keshav to say. He walked away with leaden feet.

6

The next day Prema wrote a letter to Keshav.

"Keshav dearest,

I have come to know about the rude and insolent manner in which your father has treated my father, and I am frankly shocked and alarmed. I have a feeling that he has been as rough with you. You will realise how upset I am and how important it is for me to know where you stand in all this. With you by my side, I will brave any crisis. You know very well that I'm not enamoured of your father's wealth. I want only your love; that is all I need to make me happy. Come and have dinner at our place tonight. Grandfather and mother are so eager to meet you. And you know only too well what I dream of—I look forward to the day when we will be united in a sacred bond, in a rapport that remains infrangible in the severest of crises.

Love from  
Prema."

No reply came till late evening. Her mother kept repeatedly enquiring, "When is Keshav coming?" Her grandfather too had his gaze fixed on the door. Till nine o'clock, however, there was no sign of Keshav—and no reply to that letter either.

Desperate misgivings flit through Prema's mind—must be that he was busy and couldn't reply, must be he had some other appointment today, he will surely come tomorrow. She opened all his letters and perused them once again. Each word, each syllable had so much special passion in it, so much throbbing feeling, so much restless perplexity, so much loving expectation. She recalled Keshav's words which he had repeated hundreds of times. She recalled the many times he had even wept in her presence. No, she had no reason to lose hope—she had too many proofs of his love. . . And yet she passed the whole night as if impaled on a stake.

Next day she got Keshav's reply. Prema opened the letter with trembling hands; it fluttered to the ground. Her blood froze. The

letter said:

"I really don't know how to explain things to you. Please believe me when I say I've thought the matter out very carefully and come to the conclusion that it will just not be possible for me to go against the wishes of my father. I hope you don't think that I'm a coward. And frankly I'm not selfish; it's simply that I do not have the strength to overcome the obstacles that have suddenly cropped up. Please forget all that happened between us in the past. I never visualised that it would ever lead to this."

Prema heaved a long deep burning sigh, tore the letter and scattered the pieces. Tears flowed freely down her cheeks. It was utterly impossible for her to imagine that the Keshav she had accepted so intimately could have become so unfeeling. So far it had all been a golden dream — an evanescent vision that evaporated as soon as she opened her eyes. When hope itself is crushed, then what else does one live for? She had loaded all her treasures in one enchanting boat, a boat that had sunk. There would never be another such boat. With the boat that sank, she sank too.

Her mother asked, "Is that Keshav's letter?"

Without looking up Prema replied, "Yes, he's not well." What else could she say. She didn't have the courage to face the humiliation of having to recount the heartless and perfidious behaviour of Keshav.

She busied herself with household chores the whole day as if she didn't have a care in the world. She prepared dinner for the family, and herself ate well, and till late night she sang to the accompaniment of the harmonium.

Next morning they found her dead in her room. The first rosy rays of the sun played on her wan face, suffusing it with a delicate splendour.

# *Points of View*

## 1

It certainly is a rare sight to see a pretty girl early in the morning in Gandhi Park sound asleep on a mosaic bench. When pretty girls come to stroll in the park, when they laugh and play, and stare at the flowers, no one notices them; but if such a girl happens to be sleeping on the bench beside the rubbish heap—well now, that's a different story, that makes you sit up, really sit up. There are always so many people lackadaisically moving around and near the rubbish heap—old men, young men—and they all get shocked seeing this in front of them. They look once, then look askance, and hurry away. The young men smirk knowingly, the old look solemn and disturbed and shake their heads, and the young girls lower their eyes in shame.

## 2

Basant and Hashim, in shorts and vests, are sprinting barefoot in the park training for the marathon sports meet in the city during the New Year holidays. They reach the spot, see the girl, look at each other, and a lively discussion follows.

Basant says, "This is the only place she could find to sleep! Imagine!"

Hashim replies, "She's a 'pros'."

"Even 'proses' aren't so shameless."

"Of course they are shameless, that's why they are what they are."

"Don't tell me that. As if the nicest girls and 'proses' don't have many things in common. No prostitute willingly wants to sleep in

the open, out in the street."

"This is their latest art—showing off the goodies."

"The best art doesn't show, it hides. And don't the prostitutes know it!"

"And what's the hiding for—to tempt you, what else?"

"I don't know about that. But just the fact that she's sleeping here doesn't make her a 'pros'. Can't you see the vermillion in the parting of her hair—she's very much married."

"That's all a pose—it's part of their wiling and beguiling. Drink and carouse and fun and games all night, and then the morning hangover, and so she sprawls herself out any convenient place she can find."

"I think she is a respectable girl."

"What's a respectable girl doing sleeping in the park?"

"Could be, she's had a tiff and walked out."

"Let's ask her, why not."

"Don't be stupid! You can't wake a girl up like that—you don't even know her."

"So what? We'll introduce ourselves. Have some fun, *yaar*."

"And if she gets all riled up?"

"What's there to get riled up about? We'll be courteous and sympathetic. No girl takes offence at kindness. You know girls—no matter how old they get, you can get them licking out of your hand with sweetie-sweetie talk. This one is young. Such a voluptuous blend of youth and beauty—never seen anything like it, I'll tell you that."

"Her beauty haunts me all life long. Her magic haunts me like a song."

"But take my word for it—she's a 'pros', no mistake about that."

"So what if she is? Who cares so long as she is pretty? A pretty girl's a work of art. A pretty girl has all my heart."

"What are you standing and spouting poems for? Let's go to her. You stand by, I'll work on her."

"She's a proper girl, I know it."

"The only reason for a proper girl to sleep in a park is—she wants a bit of fun."

"That's what young girls of today are after. They are very forward."

"So much the better. Forward girls like forward boys like us."

"Yes, but she's a *proper* girl. And I think accosting such a girl is the height of bad manners."

"So let's go have a shot."

"But she's a—proper—I mean nice—"

"Then let's wait. When she gets up, we'll follow her. Take my word for it—she's a 'pros'."

"And take *my* word for it—she's a good girl."

"All right, let's bet on it. A tenner to begin with?"

3

Then come two elderly gentlemen, slowly, eyes glued to the ground. As if searching for their lost youth. One is fat, stoops, has dark hair; the other's grey-haired, with a back as stiff and straight as a one-stringed musical instrument. Both wear dentures and spectacles. The corpulent one's a lawyer, the spry one a doctor.

Lawyer: "Here's a taste of the twentieth century for you."

Doctor: "Yes, I see. India's catching up with the world, isn't she?"

Lawyer: "Not the best of manners though."

Doctor: "Don't start a lecture on etiquette now."

"Looks well-bred."

"Don't give me that. It's obvious, isn't it—she's from the red-light district."

"The red-light girls are not so stupid."

"And well-bred girls are! What are you trying to say?"

"These are the heady new ways. Permissiveness and all that."

"Means nothing to us. Our days are over. Let the young ones have their fling."

"Life will become worse than hell if this goes on."

"Sad thing is, we are not young any more."

"We still see young, still feel young."

"See all you want, and feel all you want."

"Wish I could be young again. Between you and me, life is such fun now-a-days, don't you think? In our days you couldn't get to see a pretty face no matter how hard you tried. Any direction you look these days, there's a bevy of beauties."

"From what I hear, the one thing young girls simply can't stand is—old men."

"I'm not convinced. A man's wealth isn't his youth, it's his



personality. There are many old men I know who are tougher than young lads. I get more and more proof of this all the time. Look at me—in what way am I less than a young one?"

"I'm not disagreeing with you, but we don't have the same spirit and enterprise, you know that. If we had any of our youthful go, why would we pass by this girl and leave her alone? I couldn't even get a good look at her. I had this horrible feeling, what would she think if she suddenly opened her eyes and saw me staring fixedly at her."

"She'd have been delighted to see her spell working so well on a fogey like you."

"Come off it!"

"Why don't you try Okasa pep pills for a few days?"

"Chandrodaya's tried them already. They are a fraud."

"Why not try a monkey gland operation?"

"Why don't you arrange a tryst for me with that girl? I'm game."

"Done. What's in it for me?"

"Meaning?"

• "Meaning I'd like to drop in off and on at your home and look at your new toy and soothe my tired eyes."

"If that's your new game, watch out. You'll have an enemy on your hands soon, meaning me."

"Oh-oh! So the mere mention of monkey glands is enough to put new life in you."

"That's another hoax! It's all perpetrated by these gangs of doctors. A hoax, take my word for it."

"*Arré* sahib, what do you know of the enchantments of young girls! This one here, in every limb, in every languorous look, in every smile is glowing with feminine grace. A hundred monkey glands won't equal one loving glance from this lovely girl."

"Come on, come on, that's enough. Let's go. A client must be waiting for me."

"All right. But this is going to be hard to forget."

"There you go again! The way she's sprawled out—I know what she's after—she's showing off her figure, her limbs, her uncombed hair, her exposed neck—she wants to drive people crazy, that's what. We can't leave like this, she wouldn't like that. She's inviting us—and we are running away!"

"We old men can love from the bottom of our heart; can a

young man ever equal the purity of our love?"

"You took the words out of my mouth. I've met many such girls; they prefer us experienced lovers. Young men are callow, impertinent, fickle and selfish. They give love—and they want something in return. But we—we are unselfishly devoted."

"I'm tickled. Very funny!"

"But beware—should any young lover of hers turn up—what then?"

"Let him turn up. I know how to handle that type."

"You planning to marry again?"

"I was—but I have a son, and he doesn't like the idea, you know what I mean. His name is Yashwant—and you know what he did, he actually brandished a gun at me! It's a mad world."

The October sun is beginning to turn lambent when the two old friends leave the place.

4

Two *devis*, one old, one young, drive up to the entrance and breeze into the park for a stroll. Their eyes fall on the still sleeping girl.

The older one exclaims, "Shameless creature!"

The young one looks sharply at the sleeping girl and replies, "If you go by looks, she seems to be from a good home."

"Face! That's all you think of! How she looks! No wonder men think women don't deserve to be liberated."

"I think she's one of those *bad* girls."

"Let her be as bad as she likes but what right has she to go about degrading the fair name of all us women is more than I can understand."

"Look at her lying out there, as if it's a cozy little bedroom of her own."

"Shameless, utterly shameless! I don't believe in purdah, I don't believe in men enslaving women in any way, but after all women have a dignity and femininity, don't they, and they can't afford to give their femininity up, can they? I get wild if I see a young girl on a street smoking a cigarette. And I can't stand these low-necked sleeveless blouses so popular nowadays—all that dreadful décolletage. . . . Does being forward mean we have to give up all the good things of our own dharma? Men don't go around in backless shirts

and low-necked *kurtas*."

"Mother, we'll never see eye to eye on this. You get so agitated when I discuss anything with you. Don't you see, men are different. A man is free. He knows he is free. He doesn't have to pretend that he's free; we do. A woman knows she isn't free and that's why she has to go about shouting and screaming and showing she is. The strong don't have to be stubborn; it's the weak who cover up their frailties with stubbornness. Won't you even allow us poor girls to show whatever little merits we have?"

"If you ask me, a woman can get what she wants by being modest and not by making a public parade. You hold a man better that way."

"Why should a woman be afraid that a man is always on the prowl? Why can't a man be in purdah for a change?"

"Shut up, Meenu! Tell that slut to get up and go sleep in her own home. Lying on the bench—legs asprawl—all these males coming and going—no sense of shame. . . . How can a girl sleep in the open like that?"

"It was such a warm night, mother. She must have found it soothing here and dropped off."

"Passing the whole night here—disgraceful!"

Meenu goes up to the sleeping girl, shakes her by the shoulder, and says, "Deviji, why are you sleeping here? Get up, go home."

The girl opens her eyes, "Oh, is it so late? Did I fall asleep? I get these dizzy spells sometimes. I know I came here hoping the fresh air would do me good. But I suddenly felt faint, and I sat down on this bench, and then I don't know what happened. I still feel weak in the knees. Oh I think I'm going to fall. I take a lot of pills but they don't seem to help. Have you heard of Dr. Shyam-nath? He's my father-in-law."

Meenu, surprised, exclaims, "Now isn't that strange! He passed by here just a while ago."

"He did? But he had no way of knowing who I was. I was a child-bride; I haven't gone to my husband's home yet."

"So you are the wife of his son Basant?"

The girl coyly lowers her head and acknowledges the fact.

Meenu smiles and says, "Oh Basant was here too. He and I are University friends."

"*Achcha!* He hasn't seen me before either."

"I'll run and call Doctor Sahib."

- "Oh no, please, I'm all right, I'll be all right in a minute."
- "I see Basant also standing there. Shall I call him?"
- "Please, *no!* There's no need."
- "Then come with us, we'll drop you, we have a car."
- "It's very kind of you."
- "Which part of the city?"
- "Begumganj. Mr. Jairamdas's house."
- "I'm going to tell Mr. Basant this very day."
- "How was I to know that he would come strolling in the park today?"
- "But you shouldn't have come alone."
- "Why, what wrong did I do?"

## *The Secret*

Neela asked, "Why did you write that letter?"

Meena countered, "To whom?"

"As if you don't know."

"I don't."

"Tell me another. He insulted me, he spread scandal about me everywhere, and you make friends with him. Is that decent?"

"You don't understand."

"Did you or didn't you write that letter?"

"I did *not*!"

"I'm sorry, it's my fault. If you weren't my elder sister, I wouldn't have asked."

"I wrote *no* one any letter."

"It's such a pleasure to learn you didn't."

"Why that smirk on your face?"

"Smirk?"

"What else?"

"You must be seeing things."

"What do you think I am—blind?"

"If you say so."

"Why did you smirk?"

"I'm telling you I did *not*!"

"I saw you with my own eyes."

"I'll never be able to convince you."

"Who do you think you are deceiving?"

"Very well, so I smirked. So what are you going to do about it, kill me?"

"Who gave you the right to smirk?"

"I beg of you, Neela, please leave me alone. I did *not* smirk."

"I'm not the fool I look."

"Oh don't I know that."

"To you I've always been a liar, haven't I?"

"Which side of the bed did you get up this morning?"

"Your side. Naturally."

"Why don't you poison me off and be happy?"

"So now I've become a murderess, have I?"

"I never said so."

"You did everything except drum it in the city. I kill, I drink, I'm proud; and you are the lady of all virtues, you're Sita, you're Savitri. That make you happy?"

"Yes, I wrote that letter, I wrote *him* that letter. What business is it of yours? Who are you to question me on what I do or don't."

"I knew it all along, it was stupid of me to ask."

"I'll write whenever I want, to whoever I want. I'll talk whenever I want, to whoever I want. Don't poke your nose in my affairs. I don't poke my nose in yours—and don't I know about the letters you write your riff-raff friends everyday."

"If you've lost all sense of shame, do what you like, it's your life."

"And since when have you become so wonderfully virtuous, may I ask? So you plan to tell Amma, is that it? Well, go and tell, I couldn't care less. Not only did I write him a letter, I met him in the park and, what do you know, we actually *spoke* to each other. Go broadcast it to Amma, and to grandfather and to the whole locality."

"It's your affair. As you sow, so you'll reap. Why should I tell anyone?"

"Oh, the patient, long-suffering sister act! Why don't you say it out straight, the grapes are sour."

"If you think so."

"And heart-burn too. Jealous."

"Rubbish!"

"Go ahead, cry it off."

"*You* cry it off. Catch me crying."

"He gave me a wristwatch. Want to see it?"

"Sure you want my evil eye on it?"

"Tell me, sweet sister, why are you so jealous?"

"Curse me if I'm jealous of you."

"The more jealous you are, the more jealous I'll make you."

"I refuse to be jealous."

"You are burning with jealousy right now."

"When is the happy event?"

"Go drown yourself."

"Not before I get the pleasure of seeing you circle the sacred fire. Wouldn't miss that for anything."

"You are interested only in the sacred fire, aren't you?"

"Oh, so it's going to be a wedding without the sacred ritual."

"You take the ritual and hypocrisy, I'm happy with love, thank you."

"You mean you'll really. . . !"

"I'm afraid of nobody."

"It's gone that far, has it? And you were the one who said, 'I never wrote that letter'. You swore you didn't."

"My private life is my private life."

"I wasn't probing, it was you who blabbed it all out."

"But why did you smirk?"

"For one simple reason—I know he'll play false with you as he did with me, and then the scoundrel will go around spreading the same story. And then like me you'll repent the day you ever met him."

"Was he in love with you or not?"

"He would lie at my feet and weep, and he vowed he would take poison and die if I refused his love."

"I don't believe you."

"It's the truth, the whole truth."

"But that's what he tells me too."

"I don't believe it."

"It's the truth, I promise you."

"And I thought he was just having a fling with you."

"You mean he's really—"

"Yes, he's a playboy."

Burying her face in her hands Meena sat still, lost in thought.

# *Tipsy on That, Drunk on This*

## 1

It was Holi, Rai Saheb Pandit Ghasiteylal was asprawl in his summer house, a little high on bhang, when the District Collector Mr Bull was announced. Mr Bull had just returned from England. He was a gregarious type, very nose-y about Indian customs and manners, and could always be seen prowling about at various fairs and festivals. Possibly gathering material for a tome on Indian culture.

Instant chaos. There were many lying in dishabille, imbibing hashish. Who could guess that the Sahib would drop in so casually. Some scurried upstairs, some hid inside, the Rai Saheb was left in the lurch. It normally took him a painful half hour to get up anyway and a full hour to put his best foot forward. This hubbub dazed him completely. He made the best of a bad job by posing as a typical Indian gentleman elegantly reclining to receive a distinguished foreign guest.

Mr Bull entered the verandah and said, "Hello, Rai Saheb, today's Holi, what?" The Rai Saheb shook hands and replied, "Yes, sir, it is our Holi."

Mr Bull: "Painting the town red, what?"

Rai Saheb: "Yes, sir, it is our town."

The Sahib picked up a long syringe, filled it with red water from one of the earthen pots and drenched Panditji's face with one precisely aimed jet. What an incredible honour! Such affection for the populace! Ah! how the Rai Saheb wished that Seth Jokhanram had been present to witness this singular distinction squirted upon humble Ghasiteylal by not just an ordinary white-skinned official but the District Collector himself. This could be nothing but the fruits of good karma. A hundred years of severe penance, no less, brought



blessings of such magnitude.

He folded his palms and said, "My lord, I am fulfilled. In return, may it please your lordship to permit this humble servant to reciprocate your kindness." Saying which, he gingerly and respectfully applied a red *tika* spot on the District Collector's forehead.

Mr Bull: "Rai Saheb, what do you have in that big pot over there?"

Rai Saheb: "It's bhang, sir, prepared in the approved manner, my lord."

Mr Bull: "What's it good for?"

Rai Saheb: "It opens one's eyes, sir. Fantastic stuff, sir."

Mr Bull: "I'll have a shot."

The doors of heaven opened in front of the Rai Saheb and he flew through them charioted on the wings of a flowery vehicle. He dare not offer the bhang in a glass—for that was never done—and a clay receptacle seemed too lowly. Ultimately he overcame his scruple, poured the bhang in a glass and offered it to the Sahib.

His mind thrilled with an indescribably fragrant happiness.

## 2

The Rai Saheb set aside next day for the reciprocal visit. An astrologer was summoned to calculate the auspicious time. Early evening was found to be ideal; so the entire morning was spent in preparations.

Mr Bull was having dinner when the Rai Saheb turned up. He was asked in. As soon as he entered the room, the strong smell of whisky assailed his nostrils. He would not so much as touch British medicines; even the very thought of whisky was abhorrent. He would have liked to press his nose shut, but what would the Sahib think? He felt nauseous but he held his ground. Mr Bull gulped down a neat peg, placed the glass on the table and said, "Look, old boy, I had a stiff one at your place yesterday, so fair's fair, you have a stiff one at my place today. Jolly good stuff, that *bung* of yours."

Rai Saheb: "Your lordship, we Hindus do not touch liquor. Our scriptures say, it is a great sin."

Mr Bull (laughing): "Come off it, Rai Saheb! What's sin, what's virtue? This is our *bung*, that's your *bung*. What's the difference? You get tipsy on that, we get drunk on this—that's all."

Rai Saheb: "But, your honour, wine is strictly forbidden."

Mr Bull: "Nonsense, old boy, lot of rubbish. Don't you believe it. If the scriptures forbid this, they forbid that too. And they'll forbid opium too. Go ahead, try a drop. Take my word for it, it's good stuff. First-rate."

Mr Bull poured a peg of whisky and actually thrust it in front of the Rai Saheb's lips. The Rai Saheb averted his face, closed his eyes and with both hands pushed the Sahib's hand away from him. Mr Bull did not know what to make of such behaviour. He got the impression that the Rai Saheb was suffering from a sudden fit of nervousness. He firmly gripped the Rai Saheb's neck and brought the glass again in front of his mouth. The Rai Saheb lost his temper. He was prepared to go a long way to please the Sahib, but this was different, this was a matter of dharma.

He said firmly, "My lord, we are Vaishnavites. To us even to touch wine is a sin."

He was so upset he could not say a word more. His voice touched a hysterical falsetto. He steadied himself and continued, "Sir, bhang is pure. Our saints, ascetics, sadhus, mahatmas, gods and goddesses all take bhang. The glories of bhang are extolled in our scriptures. Show me one pundit who doesn't take bhang. But, sir, the very word wine is a sin to us."

Mr Bull moved the glass away and sat down in a chair. "You must be mad, old boy," he said. "Never heard such tosh in my life. Wine or *bung*, your *dharam* says the same thing—both are bad, dear boy, that's what. You've got it all wrong. The whole world knows it, anything that goes to your head is bad, anything that takes away a man's reason is bad. Do you mean to tell me seriously that your pundits and gods keep a sane head after swilling copious cups of *bung*? If you ask me, much more likely they turn into devils. The truth of the matter is, old chap, and I'm not going to mince my words about this—the truth of the matter is that *bung* has made lunatics of your pundits and your gods, which is why they preach all their touch-me-touch-me-not twaddle, which is why they are a bunch of filthy unwashed louts, which is why they turn their noses at bread and won't refuse sweets, which is why they won't take water touched by any of us. Bloody lot of brainless creatures. Goodbye!"

The Rai Saheb breathed freely again. He stumbled into the verandah, entered his car and drove off home.

# *The Holi of Love*

## 1

Gangi is seventeen, a widow for three years, fully conscious of the fact that she is a widow, and that the doors of the world of happiness are forever closed to her. So why should she weep and worry? Not all come back from a fair with sweets in their hands and garlands round their necks. For some it's enough that they stand agog window-shopping in front of the razzle-dazzle and enjoy the sight of the colourful crowds. Gangi does what everyone does—she eats and drinks, chats and smiles; always cheerful, never complaining. Daybreak sees her up and about, collecting cow-dung, feeding chaff-and-oilcake mixture to the cattle, making cow-dung fuel-cakes; then she wakes her brother who milks the cows; next she goes to draw water from the well; and finally begins the time-consuming chore of cooking. All the daughters-in-law in the village make fun of her, taking special care, however, to avoid one topic of laughter; they keep her posted on the latest in-law gossip, but always sensitively manoeuvring so as not to offend her feelings about her widowhood. The same mistake that would get her elder sister-in-law a scolding, her mother abuse, and her brother a beating, is in her case a venial crime. For how will man punish whom God has already chastised? Forbidden thoughts never once enter her mind; she is a proper, docile, brainwashed widow. As far as she is concerned, some thoughts and feelings simply do not exist. There are no tempest-tossed waves in the ocean of her youth, no thundering emotions; only a smooth, sovereign, self-effacing sameness.

Holi. All the girls come out in rose-pink saris. Only Gangi is in dead-white. Her mother tells her, "Why don't you put on a coloured sari?" Gangi replies, "No, Amma, it's all right." Her sister-in-law hums the tune of a springtime song. Gangi carries on with the cooking. The kitchen is the hub of her happiness.

In the afternoon people from the neighbouring village turn up to play Holi. It's a reciprocal visit, according to the mutually-agreed custom. Maiku Mahto has the bhang ready, along with hashish-laced sweets, and other traditional stimulants. Gangi's the person who ground the bhang into paste, sweetening part of it, and keeping the rest for salting. Her brother serves the bhang, she sees that the visitors' hands are washed. The young lower their heads and walk away, the elders ask her, "How are you, child?" Or they tease her, "What's wrong, Gangiya? — doesn't your sister-in-law feed you at all? You've become so skinny." Gangi smiles and keeps silent. Her body is not her own—whether she puts on fat or no, what does it matter?

High on bhang, they start singing. Gangiya stands near her doorway and listens. It's a young *thakur*, the son of one of the village chiefs. What exquisite mellifluence! The melody charms Gangi. Her mother calls, "Come here, Gangi!" She doesn't hear. She does hear once, and goes in; but she is quickly out again, near the doorway. It's the spell of the song. Something pulling her irresistibly away. . . . The young *thakur* keeps looking in her direction and singing. His friends wonder what is the matter with him. *Where does he get such perfection of voice?* They leave; but Gangi loiters at the doorway. The young *thakur* glances once at her; and then he too leaves.

Gangi asks her father, "Who was that singing, *dada*?"

Maiku replies, "That's Garib Singh, son of Buddhu Singh of Kothar. Buddhu was friendly with us. He's dead, so his son visits our village now."

Gangi: "Is this the first time he's come here?"

Maiku: "I have not seen him before. He's just as good-natured as his father—and he has the same sweet, gentle voice. And not a touch of pride! Even when Buddhu had no grain in his storehouse, he always found a way to help people in need, especially the low-caste tanners of the village. He was born generous."

The cattle are returning to the village. Gangi goes into fetch feed for them. The melody of the song haunts her.

## 3

Many months pass. One day Gangi is busy daubing cowdung cakes on the outside wall. Suddenly she sees the young *thakur*—yes, it is him—passing by her doorway with his head bent. She leaves her work and stands up. There are no menfolk in the house; they left earlier. She is eager to tell him, *Please come in, thakur. Shall I get you some water?* But no word comes out of her lips. Her heart is thumping. There is uncanny unease in her mind. *What shall I do? How can I make him stay back?* Garib Singh glances quickly at her, once; then he lowers his eyes. There is magic in that glance; she horripilates. She runs inside and tells her mother, “Amma, it’s the *thakur*, Garib Singh.” Her mother replies, “Must have some work in our village.” By the time Gangi reappears at the doorway, the *thakur* is gone. She recommences her cowdung daubing, but the fuel cakes are now shapeless in her hands, they fall apart. Her hands seem to be paralysed; then she wakes with a start and forces herself to carry on. In her ears there seems to be a distant voice calling. She sees the *thakur* in front of her mind’s eye. The spell of that man, the enrapturing enchantment! He is speaking to her, wordlessly. Gangi listens. She does not know what he says, she only knows his glance haunts her imagination.

She lies in bed at night, and his glance still haunts her. She dreams, and in her dream is the same glance.

Months pass. One evening Maiku is sitting near the doorway spinning flax and Gangi is preparing the feed for the bullocks. Suddenly she shouts, “*Dada, dada, it’s the thakur!*”

Maiku looks up and sees Garib Singh approaching. They wish each other “Ram-Ram.”

Maiku asks, “Where to, Garib Singh? Come in and have a drink of water at our place.”

Garib Singh comes in and sits on the raised platform. He looks a little pulled down; in fact, he looks unwell.

Maiku asks, “Not keeping well?”

Garib: “No, I’m all right.”

Maiku: “You look pulled down. What’s it—debt and interest worries?”

Garib: "No worries so long as you're with us, *dada*."

Maiku: "Paid back everything?"

Garib: "Yes, *dada*. All's been paid."

Maiku tells Gangi: "Go, little one, get the *thakur* something to drink. If your brother's in, tell him to light a *chellum* for our guest."

Garib says, "I don't smoke, *dada*."

Maiku: "It's fine tobacco; home-cured; try it. Of course you smoke! Enjoy it."

Garib: "I never smoked in front of my father. I won't smoke in front of you."

His eyes fill with tears as he says this. Maiku too is deeply touched. Gangi stands, basket in hand, still as a statue. All her feelings, all her thoughts are centred on what Garib Singh is saying. She hasn't the strength to think anything or do anything but that. *How tender, how noble, how well-mannered!*

Maiku says again, "Little one, didn't you hear? Go in and get our guest some water."

Gangi is startled. She runs inside, washes the brass bowl, and puts molasses in it; then she cleans the *lota* and glass, and prepares sherbet.

Her mother asks, "Who's come, Gangiya?"

Gangi: "The *thakur*, Garib Singh. There's no milk for the sherbet."

Mother: "Of course there is. Look in the pot."

Gangi removes all the cream from the milk, mixes it with the sherbet, and comes out carrying the *lota* and the glass. The *thakur* glances at her; she lowers her head. What makes her suddenly so bashful?

The *thakur* drinks the sherbet; wishing them "Ram-Ram", he leaves.

Maiku says, "He looks so thin."

Gangi: "Is he unwell?"

Maiku: "He worries too much. He's the only one in the family. He has a large estate to look after."

Gangi is unable to sleep a wink that night. *Why does he worry? He didn't tell dada anything. Why does he worry so much? He looks so pale!*

In the morning Gangi tells her mother, "Amma, Garib Singh looks so pale and weak these days."

Mother: "He has many things to worry about, child. When his father was living, he could afford to play and take it easy. Now he's caught in the net of domesticity."

Gangi is not satisfied with the reply. She goes out and tells Maiku, "*Dada*, why didn't you tell Garib Singh not to worry so much?"

Maiku glares at her and says, "Go in and mind your own business!"

It was as if lightning had struck Gangi. *Such harsh words from dada! So dada doesn't care for him really! He has no friend. Who will explain things to him? Next time he comes, I'll speak to him myself.*

Every day Gangi thinks: *He will come.* But the *thakur* is not seen again.

Another Holi. Spring songs again in the village. The village belles come out again in rose-pink finery. Again a mixing of pastes and colours. Maiku orders bhang, hemp and other mild intoxicants. Again Gangi makes sweet bhang and salt bhang. Again the canvas-cloth is spread in the courtyard. Again, the Holi visitors. But none from Kothar.

That evening, when all are gone, Gangi is alone and restless. Disconsolately she drifts in and out of the room. She asks her brother, "No one came from Kothar?" "None," replies her brother. She enquires from her father, "There's no bhang left. What will we give to drink to the Kothar visitors?" *Dada* replies, "What visitors? At this time of night? If they wanted to, they'd have come by now."

It is late night now. Gangi still has hope. She climbs up to the temple and scans the horizon in the direction of Kothar. There is no one in sight.

Suddenly she notices flames flickering in the distance. The flames become a fire. *Strange, the Holi bonfire – today? But Holi was over yesterday. But you never know what auspicious omens the local pandits might have discovered. So that's why they never came today! They'll surely visit us tomorrow.*

She returns home and tells Maiku, "*Dada*, they're celebrating the Holi bonfire today in Kothar."

Maiku: "Little nitwit, you can't have two Holis, don't you know?"

Gangi: "I'm telling you it's so. I went up to the temple, and

I saw. I saw the bonfire with my own eyes! If you don't believe me, come with me, I'll show it to you."

Maiku: "Oh, very well, let's go."

Maiku accompanies Gangi to the temple top and looks out. He stares intently for a full minute. Without a word, he steps down.

Gangi says, "See, it's Holi, isn't it? And you wouldn't believe me!"

Maiku: "You're a fool. That's not Holi—that's a funeral pyre. Someone's dead. That's why the Kothar folk never came today."

Gangi's heart misses a beat.

Suddenly there's a shout from below: "Maiku Mahto, Garib Singh of Kothar died today."

Maiku comes down. Gangi remains standing, as if petrified, as if unconscious of herself or her surroundings. It seems to her that Garib Singh has stepped out of his pyre and is looking at her—the same look, the same face—how can she ever forget?

From that day Gangi refuses to watch Holi. Holi comes every year, bhang is made every year, the same spring songs are heard every year, red powder is smeared on revellers' faces every year, but for Gangi there will never be another Holi again.



## *The Shroud*

Near the door of the hut, father and son sit silent beside the extinct fire in the dry-gourd pot; inside, the son's young wife Budhiya, prostrate on the ground, moaning in childbirth. Spasmodic heart-rending cries issue from her lips; father and son hold their breaths. Winter night, stark ubiquitous stillness, village drowned in doom-darkness.

"She won't last," says Ghisu. "Why don't you go in and see?"

Madho replies, irritated, "If she's going to die, let her die. The sooner the better. What's there to see?"

"Don't you feel anything at all? You were happy with her a whole year. What makes you so cruel now?"

"I can't stand the sight of her suffering like that, throwing her hands and feet about."

They are tanners by caste; the village looks down on them. For each day of work he puts in, Ghisu shirks three. But the real work-shirk is Madho—a full hour of pipe-puffing for every half-hour of labour. Which is why hardly anyone ever hires them. One fistful of grain in the home, and that's it—they call it a day. Only when they miss a couple of meals do things happen—then Ghisu clambers up a tree and gathers a bundle of dry twigs which Madho peddles in the bazaar. And the money burns their pockets, and they burn their time.

There's no dearth of work in the village. It's filled with farmers and for a willing hand there's at least fifty kinds of employment. But these two are taken on when there's no way out and someone is in desperate need and does not mind two doing the work of one. These two are so self-satisfied, they have such reservoirs of inborn patience and serenity that they'll make absolutely ideal sadhus.

Their life is a marvel! Total possessions: two, perhaps three,

clay utensils. Strips and rags cover their nakedness. The worries of the world—not for them. Debts galore. They get insulted, abused, beaten up—it doesn't affect them at all. So miserably poor that people don't even mind giving them a little extra something by way of loan, though knowing fully well they'll never be able to pay it back. They pilfer peas and potatoes and whatever else they can lay their hands on from others' fields and cook a make-do meal; or they uproot half a dozen sugarcane stalks to improvise a sucking good dinner.

This is the kind of hand-to-mouth existence that Ghisu's been carrying on for sixty years; his illustrious son Madho has been faithfully following his noble father's footsteps; in fact, improving upon them. So much so that his fame has spread far and wide.

Right now they are sitting beside the dry-gourd pot fire roasting poached potatoes. Ghisu's wife died many years ago. Madho married last year. His wife brought a touch of order into their life. She ground wheat and sliced hay and earned enough for a daily seer of flour to keep these two shameless rascals alive and kicking. Her arrival made them more indolent and easy-going than ever before; what's worse, it made them pigheaded. If asked to work, they'd barefacedly demand double wages. This is the woman now writhing in mortal labour pains, and all these two idlers can think of is why doesn't she die soon and get it over with, so we can get a peaceful night's sleep.

Ghisu begins peeling the potatoes and says, "Go in and see what's wrong. The witch, she's possessed. . . . If we call the exorcist, he'll charge a rupee."

Madho's only fear is, if he goes inside Ghisu's going to polish off the lion's share of the potatoes, so he says, "I'm afraid."

"You afraid? Why? I'm here."

"So why don't *you* go in?"

"My wife lay dying, and I kept watch on her for three days. . . . But how can I do this? I've never even seen her face, how can I see her exposed? It's shameless. She won't even be able to react properly. If she sees me she'll go stiff with shame."

"My worry is, when the baby comes. . . . then what? Dry ginger, molasses, oil—we have nothing."

"No need to worry, God will provide. They aren't giving us anything today, but wait and see, tomorrow they'll be running after us with rupee coins. I had nine sons, there was never enough

in the house, but God provided, yes, He helped us out."

It's not very surprising for such a fatalism to emerge in a social set-up in which the lot of those who sweat day and night is no better than that of those who laze their lives through, and in which the poverty of the farmers is out of all proportion to the rolling riches of those who exploit them. If you ask me, Ghisu is far more intelligent than any of the farmers; it's a shrewd move on his part to dissociate himself from the thoughtless herd of zealously hard-working farmers and choose instead a sit-on-your-backside bunch of despicable do-nothings. He doesn't have it in him to adopt the devious ladder-climbing ways of loafers, the result being that while some from the rest of his indolent tribe have become heads and chiefs of the village, he remains the target of finger-pointing scorn and abuse. There is always this consolation of course that, no matter how ragged and tattered his condition is, at least he's spared the back-breaking toil of the farmers, and at least there are no takers of undue advantage of his complacent simplicity.

Both pop piping hot potatoes in their mouths. They've had nothing to eat since yesterday, and they are unable to contain their hunger any more. Their tongues get burnt. The outside of the peeled potato seems not too hot, but the moment they bite on it their tongue and palate smart and the best they can do is hurriedly gulp the scalding thing down. The stomach lining is the ideal place to cool potatoes, so, though tears keep rolling down their cheeks, they swallow fast and furiously.

Ghisu recalls the wedding at the Thakur's where he was invited as a member of the marriage party. Twenty years ago it was. What an invitation! What a feast! What copious satisfaction! This is the one event in his life he'll never forget. It's the greenest part of his memory even today.

He says, "I can't get it out of my mind. Never had another bellyful like that! The girl's side fed *puris* to all and sundry, big and small, real *puris*, fried in pure ghee. And there was sweet-sour chutney, vegetable salads spiced and pickled in curd, three kinds of fried vegetables, one juicily golumptious curry, yogurt, garden mint paste, sweets—what shall I say—I never had it so good—no one to say no—you got all you asked for—you really got to eat your heart's fill. And I gorged and gorged till I didn't have space left for a drop of water. And there were all these servers who plopped hot and fragrant *kachouris* on your plantain leaf. You keep saying no,

you spread your hand over the leaf, but who's listening to you—they go on serving merrily. And after you've washed your hands and rinsed your mouth, there's *pan* and cardamom seeds. But who wants *pan*? I was so heavy with food I couldn't even stand straight. So I scurried off home and slipped under my blanket for a good night's sleep. Such overflowing hospitality! That's the kind of man the Thakur was!"

Madho listens to all this with a mental chuckle and says, "No one feeds like that any more."

"It's a different world. People are not the same any more. They've become careful and thrifty. Stingy in weddings, stingy in religious rituals. . . . And I ask you, what are they going to do with all the money they squeeze out of us poor folk? They don't sting when it comes to squeezing, they sting when it comes to spending."

"How many did you polish off—twenty *puris*?"

"What's a mere twenty?"

"I could have polished off fifty at least."

"And what makes you think I don't? Look at these muscles! I used to be twice your size, nothing less."

They wash the potatoes down with gulps of water, tuck their knees up against their chests, cover themselves up with their dhotis and go off to sleep. Like two enormous coiled-up pythons.

While Budhiya writhes in labour.

2

Next morning Madho goes inside the room and sees his wife still and cold. Flies buzzing all over her face. Stony eyes staring at the ceiling. Body covered with dust. Baby dead in the womb.

Madho runs to Ghisu. They beat their chests and howl "Hail Hail" Neighbours hear the wailing, rush in and do their best to calm them with the traditional consolations.

Where is the time for wailing and moaning? The shroud, the sticks for the pyre—these are more important. The house is as bereft of money as an eagle's eyrie of scraps of meat.

Father and son go tearfully to the zamindar—and he's one who can't stand the sight of them. He's already given them a couple of thrashings, with his bare hands, for poaching and because they failed to report for work on time.

He asks, "What's up, Ghisu? What are you crying for? Where have you been hiding yourself? Don't like our village any more, do you?"

Ghisu prostrates himself and, tears rolling down his cheeks, says, "O my lord and provider, I'm in big trouble. Madho's wife died last night. How she suffered, sir, all the night! We kept watch by her bed all night. We got her all the medicines, everything, but she let us down, she left us. We have no one now even to cook for us. We are done for. Homeless, wasted. I'm your slave, sir, please help me cremate her. What little we had all went in the medicines. Without you we are lost. We have no other door to turn to."

The zamindar is famed for his generosity, but he knows only too well that helping out Ghisu is like trying to colour a black blanket. He feels like saying: *Go away, leave me alone. Won't come when I call, but when he's in need he comes fawning and flattering. Ungrateful badmash!* But this is no time for anger or cruelty. Grudgingly he flings two rupees at him. Not one consoling word though. Not even a glance. As if he is getting a load off his head.

If the zamindar sahib comes out with two rupees, how can the banias and moneylenders do less? And Ghisu knows the zamindar's name is splendid public relations material. Some offer two annas, some four. And in one hour Ghisu has the very cosy sum of five rupees in his hands. Some give grain, some sticks. Late that afternoon Ghisu and Madho go to the bazaar to buy the shroud, while the others get busy slicing bamboo stalks.

The gentle women of the village come one by one, stare at the corpse; they bemoan the ill fate that struck her down, their tears drop on the inert body; and they return to their homes.

3

Reaching the bazaar, Ghisu says, "What do you think, Madho, we have sticks enough for the pyre, no?"

Madho replies, "Sticks enough, yes, but we need a shroud."

"Let's go get a cheap one."

"Good. It'll be night by the time we take the corpse to the cremation ground. Who looks at shrouds in the dark?"

"It's wicked, this custom of a new shroud for a dead person—and she didn't have a threadbare covering for her when she was living—think of it!"

"And what happens to the shroud anyway—the corpse burns, and it burns with the corpse."

"That's how it goes! Now if I had these five rupees in my hand earlier I could have got her medicines."

Each is guessing the other's mind. They ramble in the bazaar, drifting from cloth shop to cloth shop. All kinds of silks and cottons everywhere, but nothing catches their fancy. Suddenly it's evening. Without knowing it they find themselves standing in front of a wine shop. It's a stroke of divine inspiration. As if by premeditated design, they step in. They stand, hesitant; then Ghisu walks up to the counter and says, "Wine man, sir, a bottle for the two of us."

Snacks and fried fish are placed in front of them and they sit in the verandah, blissfully imbibing.

They pour the wine in clay cups and get so tipsy they lose count.

Ghisu says, "Forget the shroud. She'd have to leave it behind anyway, another heap of ashes."

Madho looks up at the sky as if invoking the gods to witness his innocence. "It's a strange world, they give away thousands of rupees to Brahmins. . . . Who knows if it's worth it, if it pays off in the next life."

"The rich have money to burn, we. . . ."

"What'll we tell the others? They'll ask, Where's the shroud?"

Ghisu grins. "We'll say the money slipped from our waist-knot. We searched and searched. . . . No luck. They won't believe us, but we'll get a few more rupees anyway."

Madho grins too. He finds this idea a stroke of pure genius. And says, "Sweet thing, she was a good woman. The way she used to feed me!"

Over half the bottle's consumed when Ghisu orders two seers of *puris* with chutney, hot pickles and chicken liver pieces from the eating place opposite the wine shop. Madho runs and gets the items—a rupee-and-a-half worth of food. They have now only a few pice left.

And so they sit there gobbling *puris* with the éclat of a lion devouring his prey in the jungle. They don't have to answer to anyone, they don't fear any insult from anyone. All that's a thing of the past.

Ghisu says philosophically, "She's given us so much happiness,

she'll earn a lot of merit in heaven."

Madho lowers his head humbly and testifies, "She will, she will. God, you live in all of us. Take her to heaven. We pray to you, we beg of you from the bottom of our hearts. The feast we've had today, we haven't had the likes of it all our life."

But suddenly there's a doubt in Madho's mind. "*Dada*, isn't it true we are going to land up in the same place sooner or later?"

Ghisu avoids this naive query. He doesn't want after-life worries to sour his delicious inebriation.

"And if she up there asks us where's my shroud, what'll we say?"

"To hell with you."

"But what'll we say?"

"And how do you know she won't have a shroud? Am I the ass I look? Have I been munching hay for sixty years? She'll get her shroud if it's the last thing that happens."

Madho isn't convinced. "Who'll give it? The money's gone. She's sure to ask me. I was the one who put vermillion in her hair."

Ghisu's furious. "Listen to me. She'll have her shroud! Why can't you get that through your thick head?"

"And who's going to give it, why can't you tell me that?"

"The same people who gave us the money. Only this time they won't trust us with the cash."

As darkness darkens, and stars get starrier, increasing revelry resounds in the wine shop. Here's one singing, here's one reeling, here's another hanging on to a friend's neck, and here's a fourth thrusting a wine cup to his companion's lips.

A headiness in the air, abandon everywhere. A hollow palmful of wine is enough to get some drunk. It's not the wine only, it's the atmosphere of intoxication that does the trick. They come to drown their sorrows and before they know it they don't know if they are living or dead. Or not-living or not-dead.

Meanwhile father and son are in high spirits, the cynosure of the wine shop. How fortunate they are to have a whole bottle all to themselves!

Having had his fill, Madho gives the remaining *puris* on the leaf-plate to the nearby beggar who's been staring hungrily. And this gives him, for the first time in his life, a vibrant sensation of superior pleasure, the delight of gift-giving goodness.

"Take this," says Ghisu, "eat your fill, and bless her. The person who earned it, she's dead. But she'll get your blessings all right.

From every pore of your body, bless her! It's hard-earned money."

Madho looks up at the sky again and says, "She's going to heaven, *dada*, she's going to be queen of heaven."

Ghisu stands stock-still. Engulfed in a wave of joy, he says, "Yes, son, it's heaven for her. She hurt no one, she harmed no one. Even in death she gave us what we wanted. If heaven's not for her, who's it for—the fat bloodsuckers of the poor who go about washing their sins in the Ganga and offering prayers in the temple?"

But the mood of pious affection soon vanishes in the vacillation of intoxication. Sadness and ennui take over.

Madho says, "*Dada*, she suffered, oh how she suffered. She died, but how she suffered."

He covers his eyes with his hand and bursts into screaming sobs.

Ghisu tries to calm him. "Don't cry, son, be happy she's free at last of the web of maya, free of all fetters. Lucky woman, to have escaped the delusion of maya so soon."

The two stand up and start singing, "Enchantress of the glittering eyes! Enchantress. . . ."

The drunks stare at father and son singing away in wanton intoxication. Then both start dancing. Leaping, jumping. They tumble, they teeter, they fall. They gesticulate, they make faces. And then, in drunken torpor, they collapse on the ground.



## *Kashmir Apples*

Last evening I strolled over to the bazaar to buy a few necessities. The fruitsellers—they are all Punjabis—lie on the way. I spotted some gleaming, rosy apples stylishly arranged in one shop. And I succumbed. You see, there's a lot of talk nowadays in what is known as "informed circles" about vitamins, proteins, and the like. There was a time when you had to *pay* a man before he would bite on a tomato. But these days you can't conceive of a meal without tomatoes in it. As for carrots—you know that carrots were the poor man's food. The rich saw carrots only when they were deliciously transmogrified into the gooey concoction called *halwa*. But since the time they made the great discovery that carrots are loaded with vitamins, you can't see a dinner table anywhere without carrots prominently playing an edible role. Now take apples: what they say is that an apple a day keeps Doctor Lal away. To keep doctors at bay we're prepared to chew bitter *neem* seeds every day. Well now, apples may not be as lushy and drippy as mangoes but they are not all that low-caste either. I'm not bringing Banaras *langras*, Lucknow *dasahrís*, and Bombay's Alphonsoes into the argument, because they are a different breed altogether—there's nothing in the world that comes a mile near them. But whether they have vitamins and proteins or no, or if they have them, in what proportions they have them—on this matter no Western medical expert has pronounced his considered opinion. But apples have received a very honoured status. They are not just tasty, they're talented. I haggled with the fruitseller, and decided I'd buy half a seer.

The man said, "Babu-ji, really juicy stuff, this—straight from Kashmir. Take some. You'll enjoy them."

I handed my handkerchief to the fruitseller and said, "Select the best, all right?"

He poised the scales and said to his servant, "You! Get a half-seer of the Kashmir consignment. The pick of the lot!"

The servant chose four apples. Weighing them, he put them in a paper bag, tied the bag in my handkerchief, and handed it to me. I paid him four annas.

I placed the apples in my room when I returned, without opening the handkerchief. It isn't the done thing to eat apples or any other fruit at night. The right time is early morning. I cleaned and washed myself, and brought out one apple for breakfast. It was rotten. A clean, round, rupee size of skin was soft and stinking. I said to myself, *The man must have missed this in the dark.* I took out another. Rotten too—half of it. I said to myself, *So that's it! He conned me, the swine!* I took out the third. Not rotten, but clearly depressed on one side, as a result of heavy weight. The fourth—this one looked healthy, but had a neat tunnel bored through it, the kind you often see in berries and jujubes. When I sliced it, I found it spotted inside, as if worms had been at it.

Not one apple fit for consumption! It wasn't the loss of four annas that hurt; what hurt was the decline in our national character. The fruitseller had tricked me knowingly and deliberately! I'd have gladly excused him if only one apple had misfired. I'd have attributed it to weak eyesight and given him the benefit of the doubt. But all four bad—now what could that be except a case of downright premeditated cheating?

The trouble was that I was not unguilty either. My placing my handkerchief in his hands like that was like an open invitation to him to pull a fast one on me. It was easy enough for him to make out that here was a sucker who knew next to nothing of practical matters, the type who would never come back in a huff and ask for a replacement. Give a man occasion, and he will cheat; not otherwise. And to give such opportunity, whether out of laxity or deliberate intent, is to connive at cheating. No one thinks that babus and clerks are honest any more. Go to any law court, *thana*, or corporation office, and the treatment you'll get there will once and for all make you decide to avoid them like the plague in future.

Till very recently traders and shopkeepers could be depended on. An infinitesimal shortchanging in weights—a *chhatak* or a half-*chhatak*, say—did take place, but that's excusable. But if by mistake you handed over a ten-rupee note in place of a fiver, you really didn't have to worry. Your money was safe. I still remember the

time when—it was during the Muharram festival – I bought a paisa worth of those crisp sweetmeats called *revris*, and unknowingly I gave an eight-anna bit to the itinerant vendor. And how I ran back to him the instant I discovered my error! I had no hopes at all of recovering those eight annas. So imagine my surprise when he gladly not only returned the eight annas but asked me to forgive him!

And here was another man passing off rotten apples as Kashmiri Specials! It is my earnest request to my dear reader that he should not, as I did, close his eyes when he visits the bazaar next time. Unless he wants special Kashmir apples, that is!

## APPENDIX

### *How I Write a Story*

*Premchand .*

*(The editor of New Horizons, an Urdu magazine published from Lahore, once conducted a symposium in which eminent writers of Hindi and Urdu were asked to discuss their techniques of composition. This is Premchand's reply; it has been translated from the Hindi version in Hansraj Rahbar's biography Premchand: His Life and Work published by Atma Ram & Sons, Delhi.)*

My themes generally take their starting point from an emotional impulse, which I try to get across after giving it a flavour of drama. Please do not misunderstand me. I never write a story for the sake of describing incident and event. I write for only one reason: to present a human truth, or to show a new angle of looking at common and obvious things. Once I have this, I am ready to start with delineation of character. I believe, very sincerely, that no story can depend totally on a clever scene or a dramatic incident; the story's sap is psychological insight.

Another thing: I must have the entire sweep of the action from start to finish before I begin to write; and the characters are of course made to fit into the sweep. Prettiness and sweetness are all very well, but it is easy to make a fetish of them; as long as I have a climax to build up to, I don't care if delicate and pleasant incidents come in or no. A climax, well-developed and based on psychological truth, forgives many sins. I wrote a story recently called "The Queen of His Heart," based on an incident in the life of the Muslim emperor Timur concerning his marriage with Hamida Begum. The event is historical, but I was attracted chiefly by its

dramatic possibilities. I found them; but I was still not sure if I could build up an artistic climax out of them. Hamida Begum, as you might know, was a Turkish lady of many remarkable accomplishments besides her beauty. She was skilled in military science, and could wield a sword and shield; she had even fought in some actual battles. Timur's chief accomplishment, on the other hand, lay in his slaughter of countless Turks. I thought I spotted the possibility of building up a suitable climax in the obsessive love of a martial lady—a Turk—for her deadliest adversary. Timur was by no means a handsome man, so I decided to put in him certain patriotic and intellectual virtues which might have attracted the Begum's love. It was a good amount of cooking-up, but that is exactly how the story began.

I am also in the habit of picking up plots from friends; an incident, any incident, is good enough as a foundation. But a brisk, colourful plot, with excellent style and graceful emotion, by itself can never make a story. Let me repeat this: A story is built on a climax; a climax is built on psychological insight; and it is essential that a story move irresistibly and effortlessly, each part contributing to the climax. When I find possibilities, in an incident or a plot, of such a climax, I work on it with delight. But I also demand more. I feel that there should be a touch of humanity and poetic nuance in every story. This nuance makes a story. Everything else fails.

I don't write much; I don't think I have ever written more than two stories a month. And very frequently of course I have been dry for a succession of months. Plots and incidents are available a dozen for an anna; but psychological percipience is not found on every tree. Have that, and writing is almost an automatic affair.

It's so difficult to dissect one's technique of composition in so limited a space. The art of writing a story—any art, in fact—is a complex emotional and intellectual process. There are writers who have worked hard and picked up the art of writing fluently, with a very competent flair, but the genuine story-writer is a product of spontaneity and gift. Plot comes to him, drama and effect come to him, social depth and philosophy come to him, easily, gracefully, inspiringly. I agree no writer should be without a critical faculty. I go over my stories very carefully after writing them.

If I find that a story lacks a fresh angle of vision or an intellectual grip, or an ability to stir and please, I think it is not a good story.

I think I have failed as a writer. Here again I should be careful in what I say about myself. "Failed" stories see print with as much ease and fanfare as "passed" stories. Stories which I think have not made the grade appeal to many of my friends. I don't think a writer's word, especially on his own practice of literature, is very dependable or even valuable.













